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by Dorothy L. Sayers

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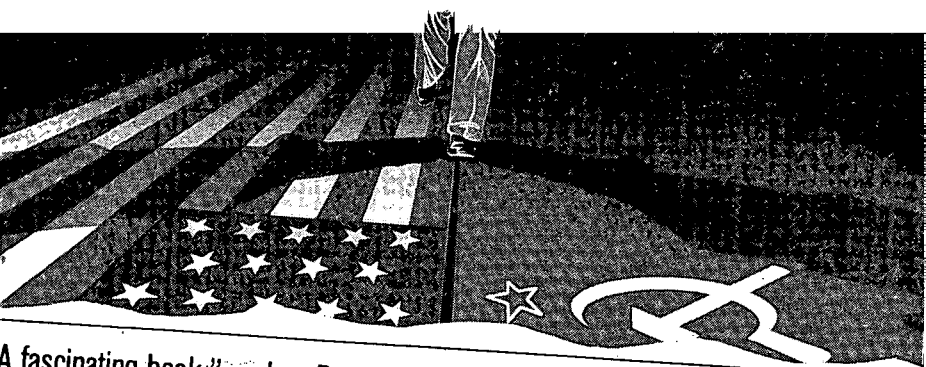
The Lazy Valley Murder

by James McKimmey

10 Stories!



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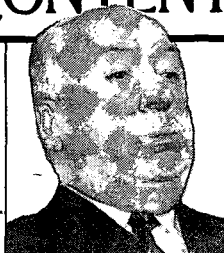
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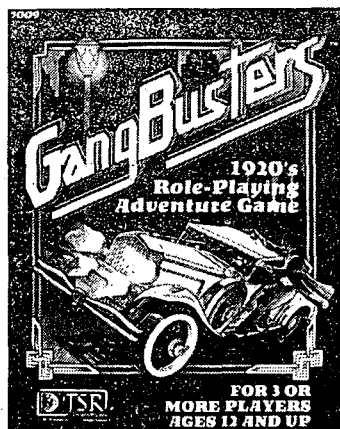
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FICTION

THE LAZY VALLEY MURDER

by

James McKimmey

Sheriff Orville Bundy, with Deputy Harvey Plummer seated beside him, sped in his black and white sedan along U.S. Highway 3. Following was a white county van, its identifying ambulance sign painted backward in red across the flat nose so it could be quickly identified in rear view mirrors. The sirens of both vehicles screamed into the hot desert air.

There were no other cars in sight as they entered the Ne-

vada region known as Lazy Valley. The recently purchased two-way radio, which kept Bundy in touch with a clerk named Mildred at the courthouse in Ghost Bluff, was silent because he was now out of range.

There was a shimmering quality to the Lazy Valley air so that mountains perhaps sixty miles in the distance had an indistinct, bluish look. Sagebrush proliferated behind barbed-wire fencing. A single gnarled Joshua tree stood guard over nothing

Illustration by Ray Lago

4



a hundred yards beyond the fencing.

"Randy Little," said Deputy Plummer in a high, reedy voice saddened by the circumstances. He was dressed as Bundy was, in a tan Western-styled uniform and wide-brimmed white felt hat. But Plummer was lean and tall in contrast to Bundy's short, wide girth. Bundy was fifty years old, Plummer twenty-eight. Both wore holstered pistols. "He was a shy one," Plummer went on. "But a nice fellow.

Not pretty to think of him stomped to death by a horse."

Bundy nodded. "Not pretty to think of anybody stomped to death by a horse." His voice resembled the croak of a bullfrog.

Bundy had been seated in his office in the courthouse when the telephone on his desk had rung. The smooth baritone voice of Kirk Ratto, the trainer at Lazy Valley Horse Ranch, had explained, with apparent calm: "We got an accident here, sheriff. Randy Little, you know him,

somehow got into a corner in a barn where one of Sherry's quarter horses, Duffy, was feeding. And that quarter horse for no reason went loco and turned loose on Randy with his hooves. I called you first and you can notify the ambulance people, only they can't do Randy no good except to transport him to Ghost Bluff for burial. That quarter horse somehow spooked out of the barn afterwards and went running into the south quarter. I'm riding out now, and I'll find him and I'll shoot him. We'll look for you soon's you can make it."

Little had arrived in Ghost Bluff five years ago, hitchhiking and looking for work. Twenty-one, slight, redheaded, and notably modest, he'd found a job in Kinder's hardware store as a clerk. Life as he'd led it—working in the store, living in a small apartment, and reading endlessly—seemed to have been enough reward for him.

Until, Bundy remembered, Sherry Gale had gone to work as a riding instructor at the Lazy Valley Horse Ranch six months ago. One day while she was in town, she'd stepped into the hardware store. Randy Little had been going out to that horse ranch ever since.

It was foolish on Randy's part, Bundy had decided. It seemed obvious to him that Sherry was used to traveling in faster lanes

than Randy was ever going to be in. But Randy never seemed to get discouraged.

"Could never see," Deputy Harvey Plummer said as the buildings of the horse ranch finally came into view, "how somebody as bookwormish as Randy could have worked up such an interest in riding horses."

"I don't think it was riding horses he worked up such an interest in."

"Well," Plummer said, "it was Sherry, wasn't it? Useless as I always thought it was. And it was one of her personal horses that killed him. Sherry might not have been bowled over by Randy. But she's got to be feeling bad over this turn of events, wouldn't you say, Orville?"

"Bad, yes," Bundy agreed, slowing as they neared the entrance to the ranch.

The sign at the head of the drive was a board painted white with black lettering:

BUD HAYES' LAZY VALLEY
HORSE RANCH.
HORSES BOARDED,
TRAINED, RENTED, GROOMED,
BROKEN, TRANSPORTED.
FEATURING:
KIRK RATTO,
TRAINER—RACEHORSE
TRAINING, BREAKING, LAYUPS,
SALES CONDITIONING
AND

SHERRY GALE,
INSTRUCTOR—WESTERN,
ENGLISH, HALTER LESSONS

Clusters of riding horses were in corrals near the large white frame main house. There were two barns. Smaller buildings, where employees lived, were scattered behind the house.

A gust of wind blew dust up in a small cloud as Bundy stopped his car. The ambulance driver did the same with the van. A boy in his early teens wearing faded denim and a ragged straw hat appeared from one of the barns and hurried toward them. He looked like a youth typical of those who came here to work, Bundy thought. An intense love of horses compensated for getting a rustic room, basic board, and very little money in return for some very hard labor.

The sirens, before they were turned off, had brought into view three other young people as well, beside the main corral. It was a Monday afternoon, and there were no customers in evidence. Bundy and Plummer got out of the car; the ambulance driver remained in his seat.

The boy with the ragged straw hat said in a newly deepened voice, "They're in that second barn there, sheriff."

"Who's they, son?" Bundy asked. He and Plummer started for the barn, the boy walking

beside them and the ambulance slowly following. A horse whinnied. Wind blowing from a corral carried the odor of manure.

"Randy and Kirk and Sherry and Duffy," the boy answered.

"Duffy's the horse," Bundy said. "Dead or alive?"

"Alive. It was Sherry who rode out and found him first. Kirk was out to shoot it, only she's stopped him. So far."

"Where's Bud?" Bundy said, inquiring about the ranch's owner.

"Arizona, buying some Arabian horses."

They stopped beside the door of the barn. The ambulance driver braked his vehicle and got out, looking reluctant. He should have had an assistant with him, but the assistant was ill today.

"I ain't had the stomach to go in there and look at Randy yet," said the boy, "and I ain't got it now. I'm staying out here."

"Wish I could, too," Bundy said truthfully.

"Three of us," Deputy Plummer added.

"Four," said the ambulance driver, getting out the stretcher.

As Bundy stepped into the interior of the barn, he could smell earth and leather and straw as well as the evidence of horses. A large shaft of sunlight poured through a wide window and

across the packed dirt floor of the building, illuminating everyone there.

A tan horse, its eyes a little wild, was in a stall with the gate shut. He was, it appeared, the only horse in the barn at the moment.

In front of the stall's gate, her back to it, stood Sherry Gale. She was a healthy looking woman in her middle twenties, with long, thick, chestnut-colored hair and a round, tanned face pretty enough that a complete lack of makeup failed to diminish her attractiveness. She wore new designer jeans and a red-checked shirt over a generous body. Her pale blue eyes reflected shock, anger, and grief.

Standing several feet away, leaning against the gate of an empty stall, was Kirk Ratto, a man even taller than Deputy Plummer, wider, and leanly muscled. His face, beneath a black Western straw hat with a white woven band and a white feather, was deeply browned and ruggedly handsome. He wore bleached bluejeans and a tooled leather belt with an oversized silver buckle engraved with blue letters that announced KIRK. Powerful chest muscles swelled his white-piped, yoke-backed blue chambray shirt. Black bullhide boots with narrowed toes and high heels encased his feet. He held a pump-action rifle familiarly with one

hand. Seated calmly beside him was a small black dog with a single white spot on its forehead. Bundy knew the animal to be Ratto's.

In a far corner lay a crumpled, motionless figure in sports clothes that had turned, in places, as red with blood as was the color of Randy Little's now-ruffled hair.

"Tell him to put that rifle down, sheriff," Sherry Gale said in a tense, strained voice. "He's not killing this horse!"

"Quarter horse ain't himself no more, Sherry," Ratto said gently with his rich voice. "I got to shoot him and bury him."

"My horse isn't crazy!" the girl said shrilly to Bundy. "Just something made him do it, I don't know what! And you're not killing him, Ratto!"

Ratto smiled. "Don't be blind no more about that quarter horse, honey. You own another, even if it's getting up in years. This here one's got to be shot, that's all there is to it."

"Never!"

Bundy, moving deeper into the barn, saw that the horse had been recently groomed so that its good lines and healthy coat were shown off well. And it had been properly shod, obviously with great care.

But he also noticed that the hair of its lower rear legs showed some crimson matting, as though the skin beneath had

been cut and there had been some bleeding. There was an incongruous look to it against the horse's neatness, which is why, he thought, it had caught his attention. It had probably struck some sharp rocks with its back legs out there somewhere, after bolting out of the barn.

The ambulance driver bent over the body of Randy Little. "No doubt that he's dead," he said.

"I'll help you," Deputy Plummer offered.

Bundy waited in silence as the two men moved out of the barn with what was left of Little, feeling grateful for his deputy's willingness to volunteer in this fashion. Harvey Plummer had his faults, he knew well enough, including a seemingly incurable habit of wanting to correct others he believed to be in the wrong. But Plummer, Bundy had decided, was still the best deputy he would ever have.

"Why don't you step outside, Sherry?" Kirk Ratto said to the girl. "And I'll see to it with that quarter horse."

"You won't see to anything."

Bundy had noticed the girl giving one final glance at Little's departing body, her skin seeming to pale beneath her tan. His death had truly upset her, it was obvious. It was certainly because it had been her

horse that had been responsible. But perhaps she had also been more involved with the young man than he'd thought.

"Sherry is what you call your romantic," Ratto said pleasantly. "That there's nothing but a damn horse with the brains of a three-year-old kid. She don't want to face what's real."

"Like you, for example," Sherry said. "You sure as hell are real. And I'm sick of facing you."

A siren started up again as the ambulance left the ranch. Bundy remembered that he'd thought Sherry would tumble for Ratto's craggy good looks. Ratto seemed to be the kind of man Sherry had always preferred. Ratto himself, in fact, had predicted the same thing more than once over beer in the Blood Bucket in Ghost Bluff.

But then Ratto, a recent arrival in the area, was evidently anything but modest.

He was handsome enough to be in the movies, and he'd claimed to have been just that—although nobody in town could remember having seen him in any of the motion pictures he gave himself credit for.

He'd claimed to have been a paratrooper in Viet Nam, the winner of three Purple Hearts, and the recipient as well of the Silver Star and three Bronze Stars.

And he'd insisted he was the best horse trainer west of the Mississippi. Bud Hayes, for whom Ratto trained horses, had commented that it might be true, when it came to training riding horses anyway. On the other hand his proficiency with racehorses left a great deal to be desired, in Hayes' opinion.

Bundy didn't know whether Ratto's claims were true, but one thing was now obvious, he decided. If Sherry had ever been attracted to the man, she no longer was. And if, at last, she'd grown interested instead in Randy Little with his quiet, unassuming qualities, then Bundy was finding in himself more respect for the girl than he'd previously been able to summon up.

Perhaps that possible interest in Randy, Bundy conjectured, was compelling Ratto, out of jealous revenge, into trying to destroy her beloved horse.

Harvey Plummer came back into the barn. Bundy said to Ratto, "Were you in here when that horse went to work on Randy?"

"Course not," Ratto said. "I was in the tack shed."

The tack shed, Bundy knew, was next to the barn, where saddles and harnesses were kept.

"And you, Sherry?" Bundy asked.

"I was in the main corral grooming my other horse." She seemed near tears now. "So it'd be pretty for Randy to ride. We were going out together."

"That other horse of yours, Sherry, a hundred years old anyway," Ratto said, grinning, "was all Randy was ever going to stay on, I'll tell you that."

"Why don't you shut your damn face!" Sherry screeched.

"That might be a good idea," Bundy agreed, irritation in his voice now. "For the moment anyway."

Ratto smiled and shrugged.

"What was Randy doing in the barn?" Bundy asked Sherry.

"It was hot in the sun. So I told him to come in here where he could cool off before we rode out."

"And the gate," Bundy said, nodding at the stall where Duffy stood, "was closed the last time you knew?"

"Yes!" Her eyes thinned dangerously as she looked at Ratto. "And so how did it get open?"

"Don't ask me," Ratto said, bending to stroke the head of his little black dog affectionately. "I was in the tack shed. But pardon me for speaking."

"Did you come in here behind Randy and open the gate? Which set Duffy loose? So that he did what he did? Then you let him out of the barn?"

"Sheriff," Ratto said, undisturbed, "she's getting hysteri-

cal now. I was in the tack shed when I heard Randy screaming and them hooves slamming down. By the time I got to this here barn, that quarter horse was out and running southward. Barn door was open behind him—Randy didn't pull her shut proper coming in."

Sherry had begun trembling, and tears showed in her eyes. "Goddamn you, Ratto," she managed. "Randy was so smart and you're so damn dumb you couldn't stand him living any more! You just the same as killed him!"

"It would appear to me, sheriff," Ratto said, looking mean now, "she's gone as loco as her quarter horse."

Bundy stood silent for a few seconds. Then he said to Ratto, "Put the rifle down."

"It's my rifle, sheriff," Ratto said, giving Bundy a steely stare. "I've been put in charge of this ranch while Bud's gone to Arizona. That should be up to me."

"Do it!" Bundy said with his bullfrog voice.

Slowly, Ratto placed the butt of his rifle on the dirt and balanced the muzzle against the wood of a stall.

"Harvey," Bundy said to his deputy, "let's move down a way for a private chat."

Plummer nodded with impor-

tance. They walked along an aisle between stalls and stopped.

"Here's what I want you to do now," Bundy said in a low rumble. "Go out and question the kids working here about what they saw and heard."

"I will," Plummer whispered, wearing his best lawman's expression — authoritative, threatening.

Bundy considered. There would be a horse trailer and an extra truck here. But Ratto, being in charge, would refuse the loan of them, he knew. Up the road several miles, however, was Henry Porter's ranch. "Then drive on up to Henry's place," Bundy continued. "Tell him I need a horse trailer and a truck to pull it and that I'll reimburse him with county money for the privilege. Borrow one of Henry's hands to drive the truck. And have the flatbed loaded with straw. Throw on a twenty-foot length of substantial rope to boot."

"Well, now what in the world do you want with all like that?"

"I'm taking Sherry's horse into custody."

"Custody?"

"Keep your voice down, Harvey."

Stern accusation came into Plummer's eyes. "You can't arrest a horse, Orville. You can arrest a human being. But you can't arrest a horse!"

"Who's the elected sheriff of

this county? You or me?"

"Where does it say in the rules you can arrest a horse?"

"I don't have to point that out because I'm the sheriff and you're my deputy. The rule you pay attention to, Harvey, is that you've got to do what I tell you."

Bundy looked down the aisle as Ratto lowered a hand toward his rifle.

"If you touch that thing I'll shoot your hands off your wrists," the sheriff said, hand on his pistol now, his voice penetrating every nook and cranny of the building.

"Damn, if you don't get unfriendly when you're pushing your badge," Ratto said.

"Go," Bundy said to Plummer.

"All right," Plummer said reluctantly. "But I'm putting it on record right now—I'm doing it under protest! There isn't one solitary thing in the book that says you've got authority to arrest a horse!"

Kirk Ratto shifted his booted feet. "How long we got to stand here staring at one another like this, sheriff?"

"Until my deputy gets back," Bundy replied.

"From where?"

He didn't answer. Instead he said to Sherry Gale, "Do you want to put a halter on that horse now?"

"Why?" she said suspiciously.

"Everybody wants to argue with me today."

"It's my horse. I've got a right to know."

Sherry was indeed pretty, Bundy thought, and in a soft, feminine way. But he had the feeling that she could handle herself even in a barroom brawl if it came to it. "That horse is under suspicion of murder," he told her.

"Suspicion?" Ratto said. "Wasn't any other horse but that one in this barn when the kid got stomped. No suspicion to it. Look at the blood on the horse's front left hoof there."

"I've already noticed. But I represent the law. The law states that there's only innocence until proved otherwise."

"Well, regarding *people*! But that there's nothing but a damn quarter horse."

"It's Duffy," the girl shrilled.

"Put the halter on Duffy," Bundy ordered.

"I want to know why."

"So you can lead him out of this barn and into the trailer my deputy's gone to get."

"Where do you think you're taking that horse, sheriff?" Ratto exploded angrily. "He's an assassin. No place for him but in the ground."

"You can't take Duffy away from me!" the girl protested.

"For his own good as much as to detain him," Bundy said. "I'd

do the same with a human being under suspicion of murder—especially if there was a mob out to kill him.”

“Where’s there a mob out to kill that quarter horse?” Ratto said.

“It’s all wrapped up in you, much as you want to shoot that animal.” Bundy heard vehicles rolling into the ranch. “Hurry up, Sherry.”

“I’ll get the halter,” she said, suddenly willing.

When Deputy Plummer came in, he drew Bundy aside. “Got the truck and horse trailer outside. But there’s not one thing in regulations, Orville, that—”

“Never mind. What did the kids say?”

“That Sherry was sure enough over in the main corral grooming her older horse. They said Ratto went into the tack shed all right. But they got busy after and couldn’t swear he was in there when they heard the commotion of the stomping. They just saw that horse was out of the barn and heading for the beyond, and Ratto was by that time in the doorway here yelling to Sherry that her horse’d killed Randy.”

“In other words Ratto could have sneaked in here without their noticing and been here when the murder happened.”

“The size of it,” Plummer agreed. “My suggestion, Orville, is that you put Ratto in

that horse trailer out there and haul *him* into the clink. He somehow got the horse to do what it did on account of he was jealous of Randy.”

“But what single piece of evidence do I have that would allow me to arrest Ratto and jail him? Tell me?”

Plummer’s jaw ridged stubbornly. “Tell me what kind of evidence you’ve got to arrest the horse.”

“Look at the blood on its left front hoof.”

“Well,” Plummer said, looking, “all right. But if he was somehow provoked into doing it, that couldn’t be the horse’s fault. Got to be the fault of the provoker.”

“But I don’t know if that blood matches up to Randy’s, do I?” the sheriff stated. “I’m going to take the horse into custody on the basis of suspicion. But we’re going to have to have the coroner make blood tests.”

“That horse was the only horse in this barn when Randy was stomped. It’s verified by eyewitness accounts. Now you’re going to have Doc Henderson analyze the blood?”

“It’s proper procedure, the way I see it.”

“The way I see it, it’s just plain silliness!” Ratto announced.

“Not your responsibility to make that judgment. Kirk,” Bundy said, lifting his voice as

he looked at Ratto. "I want you to keep your hands off the rifle until we've driven away."

Ratto looked back at him darkly. "You're protecting a killer horse, sheriff. What ought to be done—"

"I'll decide that. Open the stall gate, Sherry, and lead the horse out to the trailer."

Sheriff Orville Bundy once again drove his black and white sedan along Highway 3, back this time in the direction of Ghost Bluff. The borrowed truck followed, driven by a ranch hand and pulling the horse trailer.

"Where you going to put that horse up anyway?" Deputy Plummer asked.

"I got a place in mind," Bundy said.

"That animal isn't very old. It's high strung. It's smelled blood now. I hope you haven't schemed up some notion I'm going to see to it while it's in quote unquote custody."

"You know horses. You've been riding them ever since you were five years old."

"Four years old," Plummer corrected. "But that quarter horse back there hasn't been handled but by Sherry. Why didn't you bring her along?"

"I wanted her to try to calm down and recover. I wanted, too, for her to stay there and keep watch on Ratto. I told her

if he leaves the ranch behind us, she's to phone the fact to the courthouse. And then Mildred," he added, tapping the speaker of the two-way radio, "can let us know. I don't want him following us to where we're going to put this horse up.

"You just mentioned," he added, "that Duffy hasn't been handled by anyone but Sherry. How do you know?"

"I've chatted a good deal with those kids who work out there when they come into town—they kind of look up to me as a lawman, Orville. And they've told me she's got the older horse she owns mainly for students to ride when she's instructing. But Duffy's hers personal. Nobody else rides him. Nobody else, in fact, touches him. They say she loves that animal like it was a child of hers."

"But she can't be on that ranch every minute of every day. Somebody could have been spending time with Duffy when she was gone."

"You're the same as saying that if Ratto spent enough time with Duffy he could have trained him how to stomp somebody?"

"It's not out of the realm of reason, in my opinion. But then I don't know as much about horses as you do, you having been riding since you were five."

"Four. But if that's what was done, it was a lot of calculating on Ratto's part. And he don't

look to be much on calculating. He's a type who just goes and does something, as I see it."

The radio sounded and Mildred, at the courthouse, announced that Sherry Gale had phoned to say that Kirk Ratto had left the Lazy Valley Horse Ranch in his red truck and was high-tailing it in the direction of Ghost Bluff.

"What do you think about our pulling off behind that grove of aspen up there ahead, Harvey?"

"Should do it," Plummer said, his eyes narrowing.

Bundy put an arm out the window of his car, signaling the driver behind them to follow.

They watched through aspen branches as Ratto's red truck hurtled past. They waited until it went out of sight on a far curve; then Bundy drove back to the highway and continued on toward Ghost Bluff, followed again by the truck and horse trailer.

"Ratto'll be looking for us in town," Plummer commented.

"We'll deposit the horse before we get to town, Harvey."

"Where at?"

"A mile this side in the trees by the river, where the horse'll have water."

And when that grove of trees beside the river was in sight, Plummer said suspiciously, "You're just plain intending to put the horse on the rope over

there, Orville? And leave it to itself? With the hay?"

"Not to itself," Bundy said, waving an arm again to the driver behind him. Once more he drove off the highway and headed across flat sagebrush land.

"Going to leave that ranch hand with the horse then, is that it?"

"Not my intention, Harvey."

Plummer's jaw ridged again.

"I think I got a good notion what you've got schemed out, Orville!"

Bundy stopped the car when it was hidden from sight of the highway. The ranch hand positioned the truck and trailer similarly.

"Help get that horse out of the trailer, Harvey, and secure it with the rope," Bundy ordered. "Unload the hay. And tell the hand to take the truck and trailer back to Henry's place. Tell him if he lets it out to anybody where the horse is, I'll skin him alive. And take your knife and scrape off some of that dried blood from the horse's front hoof into something so it can be given to Doc Henderson for analyzing."

"That horse kicked a person to death today, Orville. Now you want me to start scraping its front hoof?"

"You'll know how to handle it. You've been riding since you were five."

"Four! And I'm now getting the distinct impression you're intending to leave me out here with that animal!"

"Hurry up, Harvey. I've got things to do in town, including running a check on Ratto."

"For how long am I sitting that horse?" -

"Until tomorrow anyway — Sherry's driving in early to talk to me. I'll know better by then how to proceed with this."

"Well, what the hell am I supposed to eat out here for supper? The damned straw? And if I'm going to sleep tonight, where do I do it? On the ground?"

"I'll drive back out here with supper," Bundy said pleasantly. "We'll eat together. I'll bring a sleeping bag."

"A sleeping bag!" Plummer said loudly. "Which is to say just one of us is staying here through the night. Which is to say *me!*"

"Well," Bundy said, "I don't see any need for the both of us to be miserable."

As Bundy drove back toward the highway, he was thinking that he'd probably heard worse language than he'd just heard Harvey Plummer issuing—but he couldn't offhand remember when.

Bundy and Plummer sat on sandy soil with their backs resting against tree trunks in the grove

beside the river. The quarter horse was tethered downstream a distance. A rolled-up sleeping bag was nearby.

Plummer, using a plastic spoon, scooped up and consumed the last bit of chili from a paper bowl, then tipped up a beer bottle to finish the last drop of that. He wiped the back of a hand across his mouth and said with a mellowed voice, "They don't make better chili than the Blood Bucket's."

"I've never found it," Bundy agreed.

"Could have used another beer to quiet the heat."

"I'd have brought more, only it'd be good if you're sleeping light tonight. To protect that horse."

The river was shallow. And the sound of it running over smooth boulders was a gentle, musical sound, Bundy decided. The last light was fading, and soon the air would cool sharply. The reddish glow of a sunset that had colored long, shredded clouds was still visible on the western horizon.

"You put in that check on Kirk Ratto?" Plummer asked.

"I did. You know I was skeptical of computers when I first realized how much they were invading our existence. I'm not any more. If Mr. Ratto's got any kind of record, we're maybe going to know a lot more about him by tomorrow. He was in the

Blood Bucket when I bought the chili and beer. I just told him down bar if he intended to try following me to where I was going, it wasn't going to work—I'd lose him first. He didn't try."

"You talk to Doc Henderson?"

"He's gone to Reno and won't be back until late. I'll be in touch tomorrow and arrange for him to come out here and look the horse over. You get that dried blood scraped off?"

"Used my way with horses. And I did. Put it into a piece of folded paper and got it in my wallet for Doc Orville," Plummer said anxiously, "I regret getting up such a fierce temper when you were leaving earlier. I know you wouldn't be asking me to stay out here alone with that animal if it wasn't necessary."

"You had a reason for being upset, Harvey. And I'm sorry you've got to stay out here this way. That horse seems a lot more calm looking now, by the way."

"I've learned how to put a horse at peace, over the years."

"I count on your talents," Bundy said, pushing himself to his feet.

Bright morning sunlight as it came flowing in was filtered by the dustiness of Sheriff Bundy's

office window. Bundy sat behind his desk, with Sherry Gale nearby.

Some of the shock had gone out of her eyes, Bundy noticed. Now there was principally an expression of sadness.

"I'm going over to the funeral home when I get done here, sheriff," she said. "It's not much, but it's all that can be done now. I wish I'd never sent him into that barn."

"Don't start blaming yourself, Sherry," Bundy said soothingly. "Couldn't have been your fault. You thought a good deal of him, didn't you?"

"It was going that way," the girl said, nodding. "When I first saw him, I thought there was somebody who was never going to be of any special interest to me. But when he started coming out and asking for riding lessons, things changed. He was smarter, I guess, than anybody I'd ever known. He was polite and gentle and thoughtful."

"Do you still believe it was Ratto who somehow got your horse to stomp Randy?"

"Yes!"

"Because Ratto'd turned jealous over Randy and the attention you were giving him?"

"But I never gave Ratto one hint that I had any interest in him. Blow-hard and smartass and in love with himself like he is. I not only never slept with him, I never let him get a hand

on me. He tried to kiss me once in a corral. I told him to go kiss his damn dog. Then I kicked him with a pointy-toed boot." Her eyes flashed with emotion.

"Sherry," Bundy said, "if Ratto got your horse to do that, how? You have any ideas?"

She shook her head in frustration. "He just somehow scared Duffy into it."

"Would it be remotely possible that Ratto, at times when you were gone, could have taught that horse to stomp on command? He claims to be the best trainer west of the Mississippi."

"Maybe for making trail-riding mounts out of no-spirited horses who're too old to run any more and who're afraid he's going to whip 'em. That's his specialty. But don't tell me he could train a horse like Duffy into stomping on command when my back was turned."

Bundy finally gave up on its being a possibility.

"I don't know how he did it, but—" Her voice broke and she stopped, trying to find control. Then, dimly: "Randy's gone now — that's all I know."

Bundy let some seconds pass and then said, "I've got to find some evidence, Sherry."

"I hope to God you can, sheriff," she said. "Is Duffy all right?"

"Harvey's taking care of him."

Bundy phoned Dr. Ernest

Henderson's home number. The man's voice was fuzzy with sleepiness as he answered.

"It's the sheriff, Ernie," Bundy said. "Couldn't get you at your office."

"Well, I didn't get home until nearly two in the morning, sheriff. Even a doctor needs sleep, you know." He sounded resentful over the intrusion. "I hope this is important."

Henderson was two years out of medical school, Bundy knew, and fifty years younger than the other doctor in Ghost Bluff, Doc Shofield. Henderson had chosen this town as a place to practice because he'd heard that the lone doctor here was seventy-six years old and—only because Doc Shofield didn't want the job—there was need for a part-time coroner. Consequently, as coroner, Henderson had been able to earn extra money while he waited for his competition to die or retire—but that was probably going to be a long wait. Doc Shofield's doing either seemed highly remote, despite his years.

"Does murder strike you as important, Ernie?"

Bundy knew that Henderson preferred to be addressed as "doctor." But Henderson was a humorless, pompous man who believed that respect could be won simply by wearing a dress shirt and tie and who especially resented being under the au-

thority of people older than he. Bundy was indeed older and he had the authority—one word of complaint from him to the Board of Supervisors about the way Henderson handled his coroner's duties and the young doctor would be in severe trouble. To assist in keeping him in his place, Bundy consistently called him Ernie.

"Who got murdered?" Henderson asked, more alert now.

"Randy Little. I've arrested the suspect. And I want you to examine him."

"The suspect? I should be examining the victim, shouldn't I? How did Randy get murdered, by the way?"

"He got kicked around. I'll explain more about it while I'm driving you to the suspect."

"I know how to find the jail, sheriff."

"Suspect's not in the jail. I've deemed it advisable to detain him elsewhere. We've got him tied to a tree."

There was silence, then Henderson said, "Isn't that getting a little crude, sheriff? Even for your old fashioned ideas? Tying a suspect to a tree?"

When Bundy stopped his car in front of the doctor's house and honked his horn, Henderson came out carrying a medical bag and wearing sharply pressed slacks, a white

shirt, and a tie. He was a slight man with so undistinguished a face, Bundy thought, that if he went away tomorrow it would be hard a month later to remember how he'd looked.

"How and where did it happen?" Henderson asked.

"Out at the Lazy Valley Horse Ranch. Essentially Randy got himself into the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I'm not thrilled about examining a suspect who's kicked a man to death, sheriff."

"I told you we've got him tied to a tree."

When he'd reached the turn-off to where he'd left Plummer and the horse, Bundy slowed his car. His tires bouncing against the irregular ground, he drove to the protection of the trees beside the river.

As soon as Bundy and Henderson got out of the sheriff's sedan, Plummer said angrily, "I hope you both enjoyed a good breakfast this morning! As far as I'm concerned, it was eat hay by the horse there or not eat at all. I happened to have chosen the second!"

"Does the horse belong to the suspect?" Henderson asked.

"The horse is the suspect."

"And you want me to examine the horse, sheriff? I'm a doctor of medicine! Not a veterinarian!"

"Well, but you're the coroner in this county, Ernie," Bundy

replied. "And the horse is under suspicion of murder. Which is why I arrested him."

"What in God's name do you want me to look for?"

"Give him that blood sample, Harvey. It was scraped off a front hoof, Ernie. Take it to your office and see if it matches with a sample of Randy's blood. But right now take a look at the horse's rear legs. See that red matting? Like he was scratched? Down near the hooves?"

"That animal kicked poor Randy Little to death," Henderson said to Bundy, putting the paper containing the dried blood in a shirt pocket. "Now you want me to bend over behind the horse and examine that matting?"

"It would seem likely you'd have something in your bag that could slow that quarter horse down."

Swearing, Henderson put his bag on the ground and opened it.

Plummer stared accusingly at Bundy. "Morning's half gone and I'm starving to death and it don't mean a thing to you, does it, Orville?"

"Yes, it does," Bundy said. "But the reason I didn't bring out breakfast, Harvey, was because I thought you'd far more enjoy going into town and having it at the Blue Jay Cafe. Tell them to put it on my tab. I'll spell you while you're gone."

"I'll do just that."

"When Ernie's done here, that is," Bundy said. "That way you can drive him back into town."

"I'm getting weak and dizzy, Orville!"

Bundy unbuttoned a shirt pocket and removed a candy bar. "I did bring this. Your favorite—something to keep you going until you get to the Blue Jay."

Plummer tore off the wrapper. "It isn't Milky Ways I favor, Orville! It's Snickers!"

As they circled cautiously about the horse, Plummer said, "I'll hold his reins, doc, while you give him the needle."

"I think I've mentioned before, deputy," Henderson said, "I really do prefer to be addressed as 'doctor.'"

"Give him the needle, doc," said Plummer.

Henderson inserted it so skillfully, Bundy was surprised to note, that the horse seemed not to notice it had been done.

"That horse just going to lie down now?" Bundy asked curiously.

"I gave him enough to make him docile on his feet, that's all. You'll see the change in his eyes pretty quickly."

Bundy nodded, beginning to find a new belief in the man's ability.

Henderson watched the horse's eyes for a time. Then,

looking satisfied, he knelt to inspect its back legs. He confidently parted hairs and used cotton and alcohol and carefully squinted. When he'd finished, he stood up. "Looks to me like he was bitten."

"Bit by what?" Plummer asked.

Henderson shrugged. "Where's he been?"

"After he stomped Randy in the barn," Bundy replied, "he got loose and went out on the desert. Before we brought the horse here, I asked the girl who owns the animal what she thought. She said the matting was fresh to her eyes and that it must have happened when the horse was on the loose."

"I'll tell you exactly how that happened," Plummer said with certainty. "Was an animal holed up out there somewhere. And Duffy here invaded its territory by stepping into the hole somehow. And the animal went to biting him. Coyote maybe. Bobcat. Whatever. All that's important is there's no importance to it. What is important, Orville, is I get to the Blue Jay before I fall to the ground!"

When Plummer returned, he got out of the black and white with a paper in his hand. "Just in time I got to that food, Orville. I stopped after at the courthouse, like you told

me. Here's some scuttle on Ratto that came in on the teletype this morning."

"Have you read it?" Bundy asked, taking the paper.

"Didn't take time."

Bundy did. Then he folded the paper and put it in a shirt pocket.

"That going to help?" Plummer asked.

"Maybe to some degree."

Bundy walked to his car, sat down behind the steering wheel, and used the radio to contact the courthouse. "Phone up the Lazy Valley Horse Ranch, Mildred. Speak to Kirk Ratto first—tell him I'm going out to see him this morning and to be there when I get there. Or else. Speak to Sherry Gale second. Tell her to come to us here." He gave Mildred directions. "Instruct her to tell nobody where she's going, most especially Ratto."

Sherry Gale's car was a long, aging station wagon with a fading yellow finish. She drove it recklessly across the stretch of land between the tree grove and the highway and stopped with her tires skidding. When she got out, she was looking at her horse with concern. "He's all right?"

"He's fine," Bundy said, "except he had a tranquilizer shot so Doc Henderson could examine his back legs, which is why

I wanted you here while Harvey and I go visit Kirk Ratto."

"Doc said Duffy was bit," Plummer said importantly. "And I figured out how it happened. It was an animal holed up on the desert when the horse was loose. Duffy backed into the hole. And a coyote, bobcat, whatever, went at him. No seriousness and no importance to it."

Sherry went to her horse and put an arm around its neck, smoothing a palm down along its nose. "Ratto still says he's going to shoot Duffy sooner or later. He's fixed on it. I hope you can get him behind bars, sheriff."

"I'm going to give it my best. We'll be back before too long."

On the highway, as Bundy drove toward the horse ranch, Plummer said, "If you were to hand over that teletype so as I could go over it, it might help things."

"I want to try to think it out by myself before we get to the ranch, Harvey."

"Might be of great assistance if I were to read it and give you my ideas on how to proceed."

"What would be of greater assistance, Harvey, is if I had some quiet right now."

"Two heads are better than one."

"That's sometimes true," Bundy admitted. "But I'm not sure it is right now. There's an-

other saying, by the way, that goes: a deputy should be seen, not heard."

"Orville," Plummer said in his best correctional tone, "I grew up in a house where I heard that all the time. Only it's not a deputy should be seen, not heard, it's a woman. My father said that to my mother more times than I can count."

"Harvey?" Bundy said, an edge in his voice.

"It'd make my mother so danged mad! She'd say back to him—"

"Harvey!" Bundy said threateningly, jabbing his right thumb at his deputy as he did whenever it became necessary to hush Plummer completely.

Plummer shut his mouth and sat looking resentful but finally silenced.

Bundy stopped his car in the ranch compound. Kirk Ratto was crossing a corral, his odd stride sending him pitching forward a little as he moved; his little black dog trotted dutifully beside him. Bundy had thought there was something familiar about that stride the first time he'd seen it. He finally realized what it was. It was the way John Wayne had walked in all those Western movies. And Ratto had no doubt learned how to imitate it exactly.

Ratto came out through a gate, wearing a false smile. "Got the message, sheriff," he

said, touching the brim of his hat. "Made sure I was here."

"Where can we talk, Ratto?" Bundy asked shortly.

"First name's still Kirk," Ratto said.

"Where?"

"How about in the main house? I got the run of it while Bud's in Arizona."

The cool living room was filled with furniture dating back to the previous century. Bundy chose a straight chair. Ratto sat down on a sofa and leaned back comfortably as his dog lay down beside his boots. Plummer remained standing to Ratto's left beside a player piano.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, sheriff?" Ratto asked cheerfully.

Bundy removed the teletype from his shirt pocket. "I ran a check on you, Ratto."

"I guess I should take it as a compliment you found that much interest in me."

"When you first arrived," Bundy said, "I figured maybe you'd be the kind to go into town and tie one on at the Blood Bucket. Tear up the place, even."

Ratto grinned. "Never happened, did it?"

"No, and yet it says here on the teletype that you were accused of killing a man with your fists at a bar in Santa Fe."

Ratto chuckled.

"You were arrested and tried in court for it."

"And found not guilty," Ratto said.

"For lack of proper evidence, yes. But I imagine having that on your record is what made you keep your nose clean in Ghost Bluff, isn't it? You didn't want to get into trouble that'd put you in jail again."

"It's your conjecture, sheriff."

"Now, let's see," Bundy said, looking at the teletype again. "I recall your telling folks around here that you served as a paratrooper in Viet Nam, were wounded three times, and were consequently awarded three Purple Hearts, the Silver Star, and three Bronze Stars."

Ratto's cheerful expression was disappearing.

"That's not exactly the truth, is it, Ratto? The truth is you never got any farther than Fort Dix, where you were discharged for the reason of emotional disturbment."

"Well, for God's sake!" Deputy Harvey Plummer said, looking at Ratto with disgust.

"Being in the army's no good for a man like me," Ratto said defensively. "All my life I been free as the wind and always in the great outdoors. Except for them miserable intervals when I was waiting for trial in jail and was in the U.S. Army. Both near stifled me to death, sheriff."

"And," Bundy continued, "you've told folks you've been

in the movies. I see here that it was as a horse trainer during the filming of one low-budget Western movie made for TV."

"Horse trainer?" Plummer said scathingly to Ratto. "You gave out the impression you were some kind of hero actor!"

Ratto rubbed knuckles across his nose. "I *was* in one scene as an outrider."

"And you did something else during that filming, Ratto," Bundy said. "You were in charge of some border collies used in the picture."

Ratto shrugged. But Bundy saw that he was tensing now, his eyes turning mean.

"How long've you had that border collie there?" Bundy asked, motioning toward the little black dog whose eyes stared back at the sheriff with velvet-brown calm beneath the single white spot on its forehead.

"That there's no border collie," Plummer said.

"How long?" Bundy repeated, trying to ignore his deputy.

"A time," Ratto said, straightening.

"You know how to train dogs as well as horses, don't you, Ratto?" Bundy said. "Especially border collies like that."

"That there's no border collie," Plummer said, his voice rising. "That there's too small!"

"Border collies," Bundy said, jabbing a thumb at Plummer,

"are used for herding cattle. And the way they do it is by nipping their back legs. And that's how you killed Randy Little, isn't it?"

Ratto sat unmoving, eyes dark.

"You went into the barn after Randy did," Bundy went on. "Opened the gate of the quarter horse's stall, then set the dog to nipping the horse's rear legs, which made the horse keep rearing up and coming down on Randy, who'd got into a corner. Because you were jealous over Sherry. You the same as murdered Randy. And the dog was the weapon."

There was silence then as Plummer stared at Ratto with outraged accusation and the dog looked back at Bundy with its velvet eyes and Ratto sat motionless, the muscles of his shoulders pressing tightly against the fabric of his shirt.

"How you going to prove it?" Ratto finally asked. "Show me somebody can make this dog do what you say it did."

"I'm not going to try, Ratto, because I figure you're the only one who can. Besides—" He'd considered it all the way driving here. Lying wasn't his style, and he hated doing it. But this was one of those times when it was going to be necessary. "I've got other proof."

"Such as?" Ratto snapped.

"I drove Doc Henderson to

where we hid the quarter horse. He examined it and verified that the horse'd been bitten on the back legs by an animal."

"True!" Plummer said.

"He also took a specimen of dried saliva off that horse's legs," Bundy said.

Plummer's head swiveled. "Saliva?"

"And," Bundy added, "he got an impression of the teeth marks."

"Orville!"

Bundy began jabbing his thumb again. He watched Ratto lean forward, hands held flat on his knees.

"I'm taking both you and your dog into custody, Ratto," Bundy stated. "Because all Doc Henderson has got to do is match that saliva specimen with the dog's and match the impression of the teeth marks to the dog's teeth. And you're going to be in prison the rest of your life."

The fingers of Ratto's right hand suddenly snapped together with a crack. The little black dog leaped into the air, straight for Bundy's throat, its sharp teeth bared. At the same time Ratto came off the sofa, reaching for Plummer's holstered pistol.

Instinctively, Bundy swept the white cowboy hat off his head and got it between him and the dog. The dog's teeth sank into felt. As the dog

dropped back to the floor, Bundy saw that Ratto held the pistol of a startled, dismayed Plummer. "I ain't going to no prison for the rest of my life!"

The dog bounced back into the air, and again Bundy managed to get the hat in the way.

"If that dog can't get it done, Bundy," Ratto said savagely, "I'll finish the job."

Plummer dived at Ratto. The gun exploded as the deputy hit the large man's knees. Bundy felt the bullet grazing his scalp as he again jabbed the hat at the attacking dog.

Bundy saw then that the gun had been knocked out of Ratto's hand as Ratto was driven to the floor. Plummer was climbing along him like a monkey to fit strong hands around the struggling man's neck. "Call the dog off!" Plummer said.

Ratto's face began to redden.

"Call it off!" Plummer demanded, tightening his hands.

"Quit!" Ratto finally choked.

The dog had been preparing to leap again. But it stopped. It turned to look at its master.

Bundy pulled out his own pistol. "Let up on him now, Harvey. Stay like you are, Ratto, until I tell you otherwise."

Plummer took his hands away from Ratto's neck and rose, staring down at him menacingly.

The little black dog walked to where Ratto lay and sat

down. He then looked again at Bundy, his eyes once more soft brown velvet pools.

Bundy, Plummer, and Sherry Gale stood beside the fence of a corral in which the quarter horse named Duffy was feeding contentedly from a wooden trough. A morning sun shone down brightly on the land that made up the Lazy Valley Horse Ranch. Sherry was smiling.

"Your head's going to be all right, sheriff?"

Uncharacteristically the sheriff held his hat instead of wearing it—a bandage prevented it from fitting. "A hard head like I've got can take most anything, Sherry. It'll even deflect bullets."

"Look at how many holes that dog put in your hat!" she said.

"Proves a good Western hat has got more uses than you'd think. We can even put it up as court evidence that not only did Ratto have that dog trained as a border collie but as an outright attack dog as well. It'll help send him to prison for certain."

"Where that horse thief belongs! Well—" Her eyes became momentarily shadowed. "It doesn't bring Randy back. But..." Her smile returned. "Got to hand it to you, sheriff, for getting it done like you did."

She turned to Plummer. "And you, too, deputy. It took a lot of nerve to dive on him the way the sheriff described it. A lot of *man!*"

Bundy watched Plummer's face begin to flush, but the deputy was beaming at the same time. "Name's Harvey, you know," Plummer said.

"All right," Sherry said, "and you know my name, Harvey. You've got to drop out here again some time soon. If it'd interest you, I'll show you how to ride."

"Well," Plummer said, slapping his thigh with a palm, "I think it just would!"

Driving back to Ghost Bluff, Plummer said, "I'm going to do that, Orville. Let things be for an interval, in respect to Randy. Then I'm going back out there and let her show me how to ride a horse."

"But you told me you've been riding since you were five, Harvey."

"Four. And she don't have to know that, does she? I tell you, Orville, I never realized how pretty that girl was until today."

"Proves how aging can improve your vision. It never went unnoticed on my part from the first time I saw her."

"Well, I guess time improves a lot of things. Like everything looks better today than it did

yesterday. And it was you who turned it that way. Orville, I just about ruined things again, didn't I?"

"Now, Harvey."

"When you started in on Ratto about Doc Henderson and the dried saliva and the impression of the dog's teeth marks, all of which I knew wasn't factual, I failed to see where you were going! And there I was opening my mouth up again, trying to correct you—until your thumb started jabbing away at me. It's a bad habit of mine, Orville. I'm quitting it as of now and forever."

"That's fine, Harvey. But thinking back, I realize that baiting Ratto the way I was doing, to get him to reveal how he'd trained that dog, could have gotten us both killed. I'm mighty grateful for your having the strength and courage and athletic ability to put Ratto out of commission the way you did."

"It was all part of the duty," Plummer said, pleased. "And I want to tell you too, Orville,

your giving Ratto's dog to Henry Porter where it can be used on a cattle ranch was good thinking."

"I just figure somebody'll be able to retrain that border collie to perform as good as it did for Ratto."

"Now on that subject, Orville—that there is no more a border collie than I am! It's a whole lot smaller, don't you know that? It's got shorter hair. The color's not the same. I can tell you thirty-six things that're different between that dog and a real border collie. I tell you, Orville . . ."

Gradually, Bundy mentally tuned out the sound of his deputy's voice, as he'd long since learned to do. Plummer wasn't going to quit on it now, not even through beer time at the Blood Bucket at the end of this day, Bundy was certain.

And so Bundy drove in peace, not hearing a word as his deputy talked on, just realizing that it was true—everything did look better today than it had yesterday.

FICTION

The Snooper Got Caught

by
Ingram
Meyer



It was shortly before closing time in the afternoon when the intercom buzzed from the outer office, and Grandma, picking up the phone, raised an eyebrow in surprise. She glanced at Pixy. "All right, Sophie, give us five minutes, then send him in."

The detectives still weren't used to the luxury of having a full-time secretary. In fact, having an office at all was still very new to them, as they had until recently operated their inquiry agency from Pixy's house. Actually they had run it just as much from Grandma's place because the two houses stood side by side. But business had been exceptionally good lately, and they were finally able to afford a small rented office downtown. And they could hire a secretary. The latter had been a sore point between the partners, though, as Pixy had had visions of a young, tall, slim, and incredibly beautiful blonde, and Grandma—not wanting any "goings-on"

in their place—had hired her girlfriend Sophie Carlton. Tall, slim, and young she was not. Neither was she a blonde. She was instead a little on the plump side, only five foot two or three—like Pixy—and her hair was dyed red and was spiky. Sophie was not a beauty.

"Who's out there, Gran?" asked Pixy.

"A man by the name of Coriander Hills. Ever heard of anyone by that name?"

Pixy looked surprised. "Yeah, I've heard of the guy. We call him Cory for short."

"We, Pixy?"

"He's the baritone in a barbershop quartet. Comes once in a while down to the tavern to sit in on a pok—I mean—"

"You mean POKER, Pixy, and you know it!" snarled Grandma, shaking her head sadly. Her partner was really going to the dogs lately and she had better do something about it. Maybe she shouldn't have scared his latest girlfriend away. "Besides gambling and singing funny, what else does the man do?"

"Coriander Hills used to have a little column in one of the lesser northwestern weekly tabloids. Got fired, though, for writing a few rather spicy articles about a couple of aspiring politicians. He was up on a libel charge and lost his shirt to one of them, a guy by the name of Bill Fleitwood. It was a newspaper headline for two days in a row. After that, Bill Fleitwood's grinning face popped up all over for a while, but then he lost an election all by himself. Now he's trying again—you should get more interested in politics, Gran. Anyway, Cory has a real good baritone voice, and his barbershop quartet is quite famous in an amateurish sort of way. Haven't you ever heard of the Clambake Four? They sing at community things and sometimes in shopping malls."

Grandma shrugged. She probably had, but they couldn't have been all that good or she'd remember. The potential client didn't seem especially interesting. He sounded like a loudmouthed little weasel who needed someone to get him out of trouble once more. Maybe they should just kick him out; penniless clients didn't interest her at all.

There was a knock on the door and Sophie Carlton stuck her head in.

"Okay now?" she asked. She opened the door wide and announced in her high, affected, what she thought business voice, "Mr. Coriander Hills."

The man who entered was in his late forties or early fifties. He

was of average height and build with short brown hair sprinkled with grey, and he wore thick horn-rimmed glasses. A magnificent handlebar mustache sprouted under his nose.

"How do you do," he said and sat down on one of the new vinyl-covered armchairs Grandma indicated. He did not seem to have recognized Pixy, or at least he didn't show it.

"And what can we do for you, Mr. Hills?" Grandma asked. She was sitting behind her desk in her swivel chair. Pixy sat down on the corner of his own desk, feet dangling.

Coriander Hills looked about the office, taking in the inexpensive new plastic and chrome furniture, the single filing cabinet beside a tall, narrow bookshelf, and the window sill filled with Grandma's potted plants. The detectives felt a little uncomfortable at the columnist's obvious scrutiny. "I don't even know if you're the right people to take on my case," he said.

Grandma grew two inches taller in her seat. The right people for WHAT!? Who the hell did this person think he was? Their inquiry agency could handle ANYTHING! But the man went right on.

"I need someone to find out a couple of things for me. Something rather peculiar—in fact, silly.

"I have recently moved down to South Orquince Street into an older rented duplex. The carport on my side is built out into a sort of rumpus room, and my buddies and I thought it would make a great place for our singing practice. They even offered to help pay the rent. The district is quiet and the properties are rather large, so we were sure we wouldn't disturb anybody." Coriander Hills seemed a little annoyed that Pixy was folding and unfolding an old envelope and Grandma was puttering with a cactus on her desk.

"But things haven't worked out as planned, and we've found out why the previous renters moved away. It was because of the neighbors. There's something very peculiar going on over there. Little groups of people come and go more or less at all hours. At first I thought that perhaps they belonged to some sort of amateur theater group, and I was rather pleased. But then, after a few days, the people started getting on my nerves, and also on my buddies'. They now refuse to practice singing at my place."

"What do the neighbors do that is more peculiar than—" Grandma let her sentence hang in the air.

Coriander Hills pursed his lips.

"They're a rowdy bunch. They yell and scream, and there's banging and crashing. You'd think they all go berserk once they're

inside the front door." He shuddered. "I've been thinking about complaining to the police, but our street is just outside the city limits, and there's no noise pollution bylaw. The whole thing has given me a non-stop headache."

"Have you gone next door and talked to the people?" asked Grandma. "Who pays the rent over there?"

"A man by the name of Rob Rodwich. And sure, I've been there—twice, in fact. So now they won't even open the door when I knock. All Rodwich did was make rude remarks and tell me to mind my own business. Said they weren't loud at all; said they were hardly ever at home. But *somebody* comes over there, screeching and hollering."

"Maybe a nasty mother-in-law," laughed Pixy, but Hills just glowered at him.

"The other day I even tried to follow home a couple of his visitors, who had come in an old van. Unfortunately they spotted me. There isn't much traffic in the area. After that I only saw some people arrive on motorbikes, and I can't very well follow them!" He sighed.

"I've tried to contact the owner of our duplex, but the old lady is on a cruise somewhere."

"Maybe the neighbors raise dogs?" Grandma said. "Tropical birds? Some sort of animals that go wild with excitement when visitors—perhaps perfectly nice ones—arrive at the house?"

Coriander Hills shook his head. "No, the sounds aren't like that."

But Grandma's thoughts had drifted off at the mention of animals: had she fed her two cats that morning? She missed Coriander Hills's further account of the undesirable neighbors and just caught the last of the sentence,

"—maybe stay for a time and find out what's going on."

"You really want to hire us to spy on your next door neighbors?" she asked. "Just because they are a little noisy at times? What kind of inquiry agency do you think we run here anyhow?"

"I didn't say 'spy,'" said Coriander Hills. "I only ask that you spend a couple of days—and maybe a night—in my half. I've got to do something. The screeching and screaming and other awful noises are driving me around the bend. And I leased the place for a year, so I can't move out."

He looked from one detective to the other.

"The noises *are* human then?" Pixy persisted. He knew the area around Orquince Street. There were tall old chestnut trees along the roads, and the properties were treed, too; the houses lay well back. He had been a foster child near there as a high school student,

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and he hadn't liked the area then. He wouldn't like it now. There were owls and bats and garter snakes, and from a small and rather overgrown lake came large toads and bugs. And God knows what else lurked around there. His old foster mother had told him about Mrs. Bowman's ghost, and how an elderly man nearby had encountered several apparitions in his little greenhouse at the bottom of his garden. It had given Pixy the creeps. But a job was a job, and one had to be brave in certain circumstances.

"Yes," said Coriander Hills, "the sounds seem to be human."

Seem, thought Pixy. Could there be some sort of *poltergeist* in the duplex? In the end the detectives agreed to take on the case. Coriander Hills gave them the house keys. "I'll be at a barbershop singers' convention down in Portland for the next three days," he told them. "I hope the case will be wrapped up when I come back."

Grandma and Sophie Carlton waited in the hallway while Pixy set the burglar alarm and locked the door. All three looked proudly at the brand-new sign on the door.

"SMITH AND PIXLEY," Sophie read aloud. "Why didn't you use your first names as well—or at least the initials?"

"Are you kidding!" chuckled Grandma. "Would you put a name like mine up on a door where everybody can see it? *Primrose-Marie*, for goodness sake. I'll never forgive my parents for hanging that on me."

"I remember when you were still Rosie Moodle and married to Harry," said Sophie.

Pixy laughed aloud, but Grandma cut him short,

"I don't see you putting up *your* Christian name. Raleigh Harley Pixley." Grandma shook her head. "Pixy, you and I are better off without first names."

It was a little before nine o'clock the following morning when Grandma and Pixy entered the office. Sophie Carlton was already busily clacking away at the typewriter. The mail had been sorted into three little heaps, and the coffee was bubbling cheerfully in the shiny new stainless steel percolator. There was a box of fresh doughnuts on Sophie's desk.

"Sophie, you're a doll!" said Pixy. Their secretary mightn't be a beauty, but she sure was great to have around. Pixy had to admit that.

On impulse he bent down and kissed her on the cheek. "Doughnuts and coffee—umm!"

"Now, now," laughed Grandma. "No fooling around with the office staff!"

Beginning each day with a coffee break had been Grandma's idea. Might as well start off with a pleasant little conversation. Today was "work talk," though, and the topic was Coriander Hills.

Eventually, they decided that Pixy might as well drive by himself to the duplex and get the feel of the place. Listen to the noise—if any—and identify it. Grandma still had to write the report for a fraud case they had just finished so Sophie could type it up and mail it out.

It was shortly after their afternoon coffee break when the telephone rang on Sophie Carlton's desk. Since Grandma was the closest to it, she grabbed it. And before she could say "Smith and Pixley," Pixy's excited voice came over the line.

"Gran, I'm really onto something here! I'm phoning from next door, in fact."

"You WHAT?!"

"Well, the people left a while ago, so I walked around the duplex to their side, and—well, the back door lock hadn't—"

"Pixy!"

"Yeah, I know. But don't worry, I won't leave any fingerprints. I'm holding the phone with my shirttail. So, do you want me to come back to the office to report?"

"No, you wait there. It's just about closing time anyhow, so I'll ask Sophie to drive me over to the duplex, since you've got our car." (He *could* have taken his ten-speed and left the car for her.) "You've been working fast," she said in a friendlier voice. "But get the hell out of the neighbor's place and wait for me in Hills's side."

South Orquince Street was a badly kept stretch of road with large potholes. On the right several older houses, some of them converted into duplexes, were almost hidden deep within their gardens. To the left was a small lake with a decaying landing, to which were moored a few small boats. No people could be seen anywhere.

The women slowed in front of number 1524.

"This must be it," said Sophie Carlton and parked her car, with one wheel in a pothole, at the curb. "Are you sure we've got the right address?"

"Doesn't look like much, huh? But this is Coriander Hills's ad-

dress all right. And there's our Volkswagen in the driveway."

They walked slowly up the long walk and knocked on the front door. There was no answer.

"Pixy had better be back," said Grandma darkly. "I shouldn't have let him come here alone." She knocked once more, but the house was still silent. Sophie Carlton went around the house and tried the back door, but again no answer.

"Well, then we'll just have to try the neighbor's door, Sophie." Grandma was getting ticked off.

They stepped over a not very well kept rockery that divided the two properties and knocked on the neighboring door. But here, too, nothing happened.

"This reminds me of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale," whispered Sophie.

"It won't when I get my hands on Pixy! Then it will remind you of another kind of story, my friend!" snarled Grandma. "When he loses his license for misconduct—breaking into someone's house—there will be a certain amount of violence. Perhaps murder even!"

Sophie Carlton hoped for Pixy's sake that he had merely fallen asleep or something.

Grandma knocked again, but still nothing. She turned the door-knob, and to her surprise the door popped open. Sophie wanted to pull it shut quickly, but Grandma pushed her aside and stuck her head into the hallway.

"This isn't breaking and entering," she explained to her frightened friend. Then she walked right into the hall, calling, "Is anybody home?!"

"Please, Rosie, you can't do this!" pleaded Sophie. "You're no better than Pixy! What if the people come back? Just because the lock hadn't clicked properly, it doesn't mean you can—"

But Grandma had already stepped into the first room on the left. Reluctantly Sophie followed. The room was L-shaped, with the short part in front, and the long part running the width of the house.

"What a lovely fireplace!" whispered Sophie. And it was. It dominated the room and was made of big grey granite slabs, with a large firebox. A five-piece brass tool set stood on one side, and a matching basket with pressed sawdust logs in it was on the other. Around the walls stood perhaps a dozen cane-backed chairs, and over by the window was a small filing cabinet and a desk with a

swivel chair. A large calendar and a street map of Bellingham hung on the wall.

"This looks like a meeting room for some organization," remarked Grandma. She examined the little filing cabinet, but the drawers were empty. "Well, Pixy isn't here. Let's see if he has returned to Hills's half of the house by now."

But the other side of the duplex was still empty and silent. Grandma took a quick look at the Volkswagen, even underneath it, for sometimes young men lie beneath their cars and work on mysterious things. But Pixy wasn't there either. So she said to Sophie Carlton, "Let's go somewhere and get our dinner. We'll come back here later."

The service at the restaurant was slow, and it was getting dark when Grandma and Sophie Carlton returned to the duplex. They parked the car down the street and walked back to the house. Coriander Hills's side was dark, but there was a light shining through the front window next door.

"The people over there are home now," whispered Sophie. "But at least they aren't making funny noises at the moment."

Grandma stepped quietly over the dividing rockery, sneaked past the other front door, and looked through the window. Standing on tiptoe, she could just see inside. And Sophie Carlton, still on the other side, jumped when she suddenly saw her friend duck.

"Oh, my God!" whispered Grandma. "Sophie, come quick!"

Had Sophie been a few years younger, she'd have run off like crazy. As it was, she only started to tremble.

"What's wrong? What IS going on inside that place?" she whimpered. But Grandma beckoned to her again. The two older ladies tiptoed around the neighbor's carport to his back door. Carefully Grandma tried the door; it opened. Careless Pixy was no doubt responsible for that! She shook her head in disgust and whispered into Sophie's ear, "Take your creaky shoes off! Should have worn sneakers like me!"

The women crept quietly through the kitchen, and paused in the doorway to the living room. Sophie's heart was beating furiously, and Grandma bit her lower lip, for by the fireplace knelt a large, well-dressed man. He was peering into the firebox.

Grandma coughed. The man spun wildly around and jumped up.

"Oh!" cried Sophie Carlton. "It's you! I've seen you on the news a lot of times. You're Bill Fleitwood. Are we intruding? Are these your campaign headquarters?"

"Shut up, Sophie!" mumbled Grandma.

The man whom Sophie had identified as Bill Fleitwood had gone beet-red. Quickly he stooped to the fireplace and pulled the screening shut. Then he gave the two ladies a dazzling smile. Grandma thought he looked like something toothy from the zoo, and Sophie Carlton thought he was the handsomest man she'd ever seen.

"Good evening, ladies," he boomed heartily. "Can I help you with something?"

Grandma marched right across the room. Something was moving behind the black screen, something dark. She pulled the mesh screen door.

A sooty Pixy, blindfolded, hands and feet tied together with thick twine, a filthy piece of terry cloth crammed into his mouth, was in there, wiggling furiously. Grandma just snorted. She turned around, but Bill Fleitwood had already hurried out the front door and slammed it behind him.

Sophie pointed in the direction he had taken. "He—he—and there was someone else—" she stuttered.

"Let them go. Don't worry." Grandma went to the kitchen for a paring knife. First she took off Pixy's blindfold, then she cut loose the twine around his wrists and ankles. His stored up cursing could wait till last. And when he was able to tear out the filthy gag himself, curse he did! The women were shocked. They hadn't heard half the words.

"That's ENOUGH!" cried Grandma after a while. Pixy said one more especially colorful word, then dropped exhausted into the swivel chair behind the desk.

"The soot will ruin—" Sophie began.

"To hell with the soot," said the detectives in unison. Then Grandma asked Pixy to tell them what he'd been up to, getting caught sleuthing and all.

Pixy wished she hadn't come right out and said "caught"; it was too embarrassing. But, rubbing his sore wrists, he followed Grandma and Sophie Carlton over to Coriander Hills's side of the duplex.

And when they all were comfortably seated in the living room, he told them about his little misadventure.

Pixy had driven over to South Orquince Street sort of the long way around. And since it was one of the few times he'd gone out on a case without Grandma, he'd—well—dawdled. He had driven past his old foster home first, then around the

small lake. He had finally arrived at their client's duplex in the early afternoon.

Grandma was scowling over the wasted time, but Pixy just grinned at Sophie Carlton and winked.

He then told them he had seen a car pull out of the driveway next door. Both sides of the duplex had subsequently been silent and seemed empty. He had walked around the property next door, had peeked through windows. Then he had gone to the back door and on impulse had turned the doorknob. It had been locked, but the lock had been rattly. So—Pixy hated to tell this part—he had taken a nail file from his pocket and poked around in the old lock. And it had clicked open.

"Don't tell me about that, Pixy!" grumbled Grandma. "I want nothing to do with outright breaking and entering—even though the locks around this old place aren't worth two cents."

Sophie Carlton nodded her head and put her hands over her ears. Horrible courtroom scenes came to mind in which she had to testify against the dear boy.

In the house, Pixy went on, he'd looked through the files, but the names and telephone numbers he found there hadn't meant anything to him. There were about two dozen or so, without addresses or any other information about the people. But somehow he had felt they were the ones responsible for the unbearable noises that had driven poor Cory nuts.

It was then that he had phoned the office, but Grandma had wanted him to stay here.

"Here, not over on the other side!" interrupted Grandma.

Pixy shrugged.

He had barely put the telephone down, he said, when he'd heard someone fumbling with the back door, the same door he himself had come through. In a panic he had dropped the files back into the drawer. In the rush one of the loose pages had slid out of its folder, but Pixy had been able to grab it before it fell to the floor. Oh man, he had left the door unlocked! And all he could do was to press himself flat behind the door leading from the living room into the kitchen.

When he wasn't (thank goodness) discovered, he peered through the narrow space between the door hinges, and to his amazement he saw a man he recognized from television and the newspapers. The fellow was none other than Bill Fleitwood, the man who had sued Coriander Hills for libel. Pixy had been perplexed. What was a person like him, an aspiring politician, doing in a duplex next

door to the man he had successfully charged a couple of years ago? Coincidence?

And then, to Pixy's horror, someone else arrived, at the front door this time, which he heard unlocking. As the detective behind the door watched, fascinated, Fleitwood grabbed the two cardboard folders from the filing cabinet and quickly tiptoed past Pixy's door and out the back. Pixy wished he'd also left quietly, never mind if Fleitwood had seen him. But by then it was too late. He peered again into the L-shaped room. A smallish man in a cowboy outfit came in. Instantly he noticed the open drawer of the filing cabinet and rushed over to inspect it. Then he swore loudly.

Pixy's heart had begun to beat furiously. If only he hadn't *broken* into the place. It would be most embarrassing to get caught.

At that point there was a loud knock on the front door. Someone opened it and called loudly, "Are you home, Rodwich?" And the person came marching right in. It was none other than Bill Fleitwood again!

"Hello, hello!" He slapped the guy in the cowboy clothes on the back.

"Hi, hi!" said the smaller man, evidently Rob Rodwich, Coriander Hills's neighbor. "I didn't hear your car pull into the driveway." And he quickly closed the file drawer.

"I had to do some business near here," Fleitwood answered, "so I thought I might as well have a few things done to my car at the corner service station. It took longer than I'd thought, so I decided to walk over here and pay up. By the way, Rodwich, thanks for a job well done!"

Rodwich had cleared his throat and had stammered, "It was nice doing business with you. Hope to be of service to you again. About my people—"

"Forget them!" Fleitwood had laughed. "You don't want to use the same faces over and over. Nope, Rodwich, you'll have to find yourself some new—er—employees! You did get rid of the files?"

"Uh—yeah. They're gone."

"Good man!"

So, Pixy had pondered, Coriander Hills's neighbor, Rodwich, the person in whose house groups of people held meetings, worked with Fleitwood. Was he a sort of campaign manager, then?

Pixy quietly took off his shoes and, holding them under his arm, backed slowly towards the kitchen. He was hoping with all his heart that the cowboy would be too upset over the missing files, and Fleitwood too loud and hearty, to notice him.

When he was safely out, he put his shoes back on and ran, crouching, around the house. He'd had to go all the way around because there was a fairly high chainlink fence dividing the two back yards. A car, presumably Rodwich's, was now in the carport.

Suddenly Pixy had stopped. The *folders*! Fleitwood must have hidden them in a hurry somewhere between the back door and the front. Someplace where he could lay his hands on them quickly on his way home. The nerve of the man! Walks right into someone's house, steals something, then comes back again the proper way and pretends to be a great friend. It would serve him right if his stolen stuff disappeared. Pixy had grinned. Then he had wondered why Fleitwood had come back after successfully sneaking out the back way.

Grandma muttered, "Probably he was afraid that Rodwich had somehow caught a glimpse of him. Or perhaps he'd been worried that some passerby had seen him—or a neighbor. Who knows? So, go on with your tale, Pixy."

Pixy had known that his partner would insist on returning the files, but at least she should have a look at them first. Maybe Coriander Hills could even identify some of the names. Somehow, Pixy thought, he could then get the stuff back to its real owner.

He had looked under some flowering bushes, along the carport walls, up a rather bushy plum tree, and even under some large wild rhubarb leaves. And that was where he'd found them. He had scooped them up and had run, still crouching, around the front to get back to Coriander Hills's side.

And then—Pixy shuddered at the memory—someone had poked a gun in his back. Had ordered him with little stabs of the firearm back inside the house. A second person, whom he didn't see either, had blindfolded him, gagged him, and tied him up, without uttering a single word. But since one of the attackers had been big and the other one small, he'd assumed they were Fleitwood and Rodwich. At first they'd tried to push him inside the hallway closet, but it had been too cluttered. So they dragged him to the living room and shoved him inside the fireplace.

Someone had then loudly slammed a door. He'd thought both men had left the house, but shortly afterwards another door had banged, and then he knew he was all alone. Pixy started to elaborate on the pain and physical discomfort he'd endured, but Grandma told him to save it for later.

"It's a big fireplace, and it has those dark screens. I only saw you tonight when I looked through the front window. Fleitwood

had opened the screens and—”

“He wanted to see if I was still alive. That creep.”

“I wonder what they were going to do with you later on, Pixy,” pondered Grandma.

“Maybe they were going to bu—!” Sophie Carlton cried. She threw her hands in front of her mouth, horrified.

“Nah,” said Pixy, “they knew that I hadn’t actually *seen* either one of them.”

“If you were scrunched up inside the fireplace all the time Sophie and I were in the room this afternoon,” Grandma said, “why the hell didn’t you let us know?”

“A disgustingly filthy gag in one’s mouth does prevent a person from talking, you know,” answered Pixy. “And bumping one’s tied-up body against sooty walls doesn’t produce any sounds at all.”

“You could have moaned loudly.”

“Damn it, Gran—”

“Don’t swear in front of us ladies!”

“Okay, okay. The thing was, I couldn’t tell very well what was happening in the room. *You* try being blindfolded and tied up sometime. And I *did* try to moan once, but you didn’t hear me.”

“Remember, dear, when we were in there this afternoon, we were only interested in having a quick peek at the filing cabinet—which was of course empty by then. Can’t just walk into strange people’s houses and look into fireplaces.”

Good heavens, she was never short of an answer, was she.

“I still don’t know what was really going on,” said Sophie Carlton. “Can someone please explain it to me? Why would Bill Fleitwood, a handsome up-and-coming politician, associate secretly with that raunchy Rodwich?”

“That I finally figured out,” answered Pixy. “Putting two ‘n two together, so to speak. I’m sure my sleuthing partner did, too.”

Grandma nodded, and Pixy went on.

“Rob Rodwich owns a sort of employment agency for actors.”

“You mean activists.” Grandma was still trying to wipe some soot from her fingers with a lacy handkerchief.

“That’s right. Activists. Rodwich has—or had—a list of names of some presumably rather undesirable individuals whom he sends out on heckling and picketing jobs. You know, to disturb rival rallies and such.”

“Oh goodness!” exclaimed Sophie Carlton. “Now I get it. But isn’t there a law against it?”

“Who knows.” Grandma was now working on a spot on her skirt.

"But let's hope there aren't too many Fleitwoods around this town. Best thing is to vote for the guy who gets the most gibes at his rally. Seems he'll be the honest one."

"And the yelling and screaming that were heard from the other side of the duplex were hired peace disturbers, auditioning and practicing their stuff?" asked Sophie Carlton. "What a crummy thing to do!"

Grandma just shrugged, and Pixy said, "At least Coriander Hills comes away with a good scoop about the crooked Bill Fleitwood. Makes up for the libel suit of a couple of years back. Good ol' Cory deserves a break. Too bad we can't be witnesses, seeing as we more or less broke into Rodwich's house."

"WE!?" cried Grandma. "It wasn't WE who fiddled around with the back door lock!"

Pixy sighed. His partner wouldn't let him forget about that one for a long time.

Grandma laughed. "The thing that interests me the most is that Coriander Hills will get a nice sum of money for his scoop—of which a good deal will come to us. But I am concerned about the files, though. We really haven't any proof."

Pixy forgot his sore limbs and head. He jumped up and cried, "Ta-ta!" and pulled a very crumpled piece of paper from his trouser pocket. "These names and phone numbers are in our possession! The people on this list should be easy for Cory Hills to trace. He should be able to get at least one of the lot to back him up with a good newspaper story, and—oh, oh. It's just occurred to me that perhaps our client had an inkling of the goings-on over there. What do you think, Gran?"

Grandma looked up. "He must have. After all, he was a newspaper man. Not a great one, I imagine, but still, he wouldn't be as ignorant and helpless as he made himself out to be. Didn't move right next door to the little so-called employment office by accident!" She laughed out loud. "That little weasel knew what he was doing all right. Hires a couple of detectives to snoop out a scoop for him, without getting himself involved. Checking out peculiar noises in one's building isn't an offense. So if by chance one stumbles over a questionable employment service and a not very honorable public servant, it's just too bad."

"So why didn't good ol' Cory do the snooping himself?"

"And risk another lawsuit, however unlikely? No, Pixy, Coriander Hills did the thing the way *I* see it should have been done."

She would, of course!

FICTION

Customs Of Another World

by David Braly



“I tell you it’s true,” whispered Charlie Wang urgently. “Old Sam may die at any moment. He’s just hanging onto life by his obstinacy.”

Charlie Wang, a thin little man of Chinese extraction, was seated across the table from Arthur Crumb, a thin little man of English extraction, inside a Cantonese restaurant on River Valley Road in Singapore. The restaurant was crowded and noisy; the day was hot and humid the way days in Singapore always are.

“Sam Lee has been on the brink of death for years,” said Crumb.

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

"Yet he never dies. He'll probably outlive us all."

"No, no, you're not listening. I have an inside source at the Lee house." Wang made it all sound mysterious and impressive, but Crumb knew that the "inside source" was Wang's second cousin once removed, a woman in her fifties who worked at the Lee mansion as a laundress. "He is sinking fast," said Wang. "He's trying to hold on but his time has surely come. No matter how hard he struggles to live, he must certainly die soon."

Crumb shrugged his narrow shoulders. "So? What good is this news to me?"

Wang settled back in his chair and smiled. He had an evil, cowardly smile. "A wise man can make use of information, Mr. Crumb. And certainly a man like yourself—that is to say, a man in the business you're in—can find a way to profit from the demise of the honorable Sam Lee."

Crumb wondered if there were a way he could profit. None came to mind. Perhaps if he were a member of the secret society (as Singaporeans call their underworld) he would be able to take advantage of the death of an important boss like Sam Lee. But he wasn't a member of that group. He was an outsider, a representative of an Australian syndicate.

"You are mistaken," he told Wang. "When a president or premier dies, people within his government can advance themselves, but a foreign nation's ambassador to his government cannot."

Wang smiled broadly. "A wise ambassador will find a way," he insisted.

"Then I am not a 'wise' ambassador, for I see no way to profit. Besides, there won't be much of a shakeup in the Lee organization when the old man dies. Lim will just take charge, in name as well as in fact."

Lim Lee was old Sam's eldest son. He had been running the Lee organization for three and a half years. He had to consult his father, and the old man could overrule any decision he made, but generally Lim was boss and everyone in the secret society knew it.

Lim Lee. What a strange man! He was young, strong, well-groomed, generally resembled many other aggressive Chinese executives in their thirties who could be found running the city's trading companies, banks, transportation firms, and high-tech industries. Although he had ordered men killed with scant cause, he was a doting father who cleared his schedule of work for one day each week in order to be with his children, a loving husband who took frequent trips abroad with his beautiful wife, and a loyal son

who did everything in his power to make his father's last days comfortable.

Lim Lee was certainly different from Muldowney. Phelim Muldowney was Crumb's immediate superior. He was also the bane of his existence, his tormentor, his torturer, his blackmailer.

Muldowney and he had been rivals within Sydney's notorious Four Quarters Syndicate. Crumb had never planned it that way; he would have gladly forfeited a year of his life not to be an enemy of that sadistic bully. But fate, circumstances, developments—call it what you will—had put them head to head against each other. Soon they were locked in a struggle to become the chief lieutenant of the syndicate's top boss, Frank "The Icepick" Smith.

"Leave Australia and live a long, happy life," Muldowney had told him one day.

Crumb's instinct had been to take the advice. But as he had looked at Muldowney he had been so repelled that he forced himself to remain. He couldn't allow such a man to defeat him. Muldowney—six foot seven, square-jawed, wild-eyed, cauliflower-eared, with his crewcut hair and his ever-present five o'clock shadow—had smiled when he spoke. And that smile—that yellow, contemptuous, twenty-toothed smile—had angered Crumb too much to obey the tongue behind it.

He had stayed in Sydney.

At least he'd stayed for four months, until Muldowney had found out about his seeing Smith's wife Jan in a park one afternoon. Muldowney hadn't gone to Smith with this information. Instead, he'd promised Crumb he wouldn't inform Smith if Crumb left Australia and abandoned the number two job to him. Crumb had quickly accepted the proposal.

That was how Crumb had ended up in Singapore. The city was the most important non-Australian post of the Four Quarters Syndicate. When Crumb told Smith it had become too hot for him in Australia, Smith had ordered him to Singapore. Muldowney had become Smith's chief lieutenant, and Crumb had become Smith's Singapore representative reporting through Muldowney. Muldowney's slave.

One thing about Muldowney was that when he had a man down he didn't just gloat: he kicked him. One of Muldowney's duties as the number two man was to check on the foreign operations of the Four Quarters periodically. So, every three months, Muldowney flew from Sydney to Djakarta, to Manila, to Selangor, to Singapore, and home to Sydney again. That meant that two or three days

every three months Crumb had Muldowney on his back. Muldowney bad-mouthed, shoulder-slugged, and laughed at him the whole time. And, at the end of each visit, he always said goodbye with the same words: "When I'm boss, Arthur-boy, my first order will be for somebody to bring me your head in a jug of turpentine."

Yes, better to worry about Phelim Muldowney than about Sam Lee. Especially since Muldowney was due to arrive in Singapore the next morning.

That puzzled Crumb. Muldowney wasn't scheduled to be back, on his regular run, for another two weeks. This was something special. Yesterday Crumb had received a coded cable from Sydney that translated: "PHELM WILL BE IN DAY AFTER TOMORROW. URGENT YOU MEET HIM, GIVE ALL NECESSARY ASSISTANCE. IMPORTANT BUSINESS AT HAND. SMITH."

What could it be about? What could be important to the Four Quarters in Singapore that Crumb didn't know about? He attempted to know everything in Singapore and Malaysia that could be important to the organization, that could involve it in any way. It was his job. Crumb did his job well.

Perhaps something had been done behind his back. He couldn't guess what, but something. If that were the case, Crumb was sure that Muldowney would be responsible. Muldowney was always belittling him, always going behind his back and ignoring his authority. Partly Muldowney did it as an assertion of his own power. Partly he did it because he was certain that Arthur Crumb was stupid.

"Listen to you!" Muldowney had suddenly exploded during his last tour of inspection. "Talking like you actually know the local situation and wasn't an Aussie just like me!"

"I do," Crumb had said. "I've been in Singapore long enough to know it."

"You're too dumb to know much of anything, Arthur-boy. Why, just look at you, still here, working for the Four Quarters. If you was smart, you'd take a jet to some distant country and disappear there. When I'm in charge, my first order—"

"I know: my head in turpentine."

"You can bank on that, matey."

Someday he would show Muldowney. He didn't know how. Something about the organization, or about Singapore, or about a specific business activity such as smuggling—something. Yes, he would show that slob.

Charlie Wang's voice drifted in on Crumb's thoughts.

"What was that?" asked Crumb. "I was thinking about something else."

"I said that Lim Lee has called in an expensive specialist from Hong Kong. He is paying him a fortune to cure old Sam. But nothing can save that old man now."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. Sam Lee holds to his life tenaciously. He always has."

"That is true. And Lim persists in believing that his father will recover again. He goes to the temple and asks for it every day. But I tell you it is no use. The old man hardly knows his own name now. He gets worse every hour. My source reports this to me, Mr. Crumb."

Crumb rose to his feet. Wang also stood, respectfully, looking as though he might bow.

"If the information you've given me proves helpful in the future," said Crumb, "I'll see to it that a deposit is made to your bank account."

"Thank you, Mr. Crumb." Crumb walked out of the restaurant into the heavy air of the early afternoon. Almost immediately he had to pull out his handkerchief and wipe sweat from his brow. There was a pace to Singapore, an excitement that he'd found nowhere else, an excitement focused upon money and trade, and he loved that, but he hated this City of the Lion. He missed Sydney.

He often thought about Sydney. He wasn't particularly sentimental, but Sydney was his home, it was where he'd left his old friends. He felt comfortable there. Crumb could never get used to Singapore with its strange customs, its Oriental population, its heat, its pace—all its differences. In fact, there were only two things in which Singapore beat out Sydney in his mind: it loved money more; and Phelim Muldowney didn't live in it.

But he would be in the city tomorrow.

Why?

"Because Sam Lee is dying," said Muldowney. Crumb had met him at the airport and accompanied him to a hotel on Jalan Rumbia. Not until they were inside Muldowney's room did Crumb venture to ask about the reason for the sudden visit.

"I have reported on Sam Lee's sickness many times," said Crumb. "I've also noted that the old man always pulls through."

"Ahhh, but he can't go on doing that forever, matey. Sooner or later, we all die. Even me and you." Muldowney looked at Crumb in a manner meant to be significant.

Crumb pretended not to notice. "Why do you think he'll die this

time when he didn't die before?"

"We have a man inside the Lee organization who reports directly to Frank. The man says there isn't even a possibility that Sam Lee will pull through this time. His son, Lim, thinks Sam Lee will recover, but he's the only person who does."

"I see. And what does this have to do with the Four Quarters?"

Muldowney walked over to the window of his room. He looked out. Crumb could see what Muldowney saw by looking over the latter's shoulder: the city. The huge, glistening, white city. Bustling, hustling, glittering Singapore.

"Expansion," said Muldowney.

"Into Singapore? Not a chance. The secret society will let us do business here, but if you're thinking of establishing some sort of branch, forget it. They would work hand in glove with the police to slaughter us."

Muldowney turned around and smiled contemptuously at Crumb. He walked over to his bed, sat on its corner, and lit a cigarette. "Yes," he said, "into Singapore."

"It'll never happen."

"The *expert* speaking again. Well, listen to me, you little limey: we're gonna do it. I've come up with a plan to do it."

"You have?"

Muldowney's eyes turned cold and hard; Crumb wished he could take back the two words that had just escaped his lips.

"Yes," said Muldowney, "I have."

"What is the plan?"

Muldowney smiled. "That's better—not that it'll save your head. . . . The plan is to merge the Lee organization into the Four Quarters. It would be beneficial to both. Old Sam Lee would never have consented to such a merger. Too independent. But Lim Lee—might. Lim Lee loves money, and he has a college degree in business administration. It should be a simple matter to explain to him the benefits of such a course."

Now it was Crumb who smiled. "And once the Lee organization is part of the Four Quarters, Mr. Lim Lee experiences an unexpected case of dead, and we take over."

Muldowney drew deeply on his cigarette. "Not right away, of course. We would wait a while. Find out who among his lieutenants is willing to work with us and under us. When we have gotten the loyalty of some of Lee's own people, then we kill him."

Crumb wanted to show his contempt for the plan, but he didn't dare. He knew, though, that it would never work. Muldowney ap-

parently thought Lim Lee was an idiot. Lee would see right through the plan. Even if he couldn't foresee the outcome, he wouldn't agree to the merger. The Lee organization was the biggest gang in Singapore. Even for greater profits Lim Lee wouldn't subordinate himself to a foreign syndicate—to any syndicate. Power was more important to him than wealth. He already had power and wealth. He could have greater wealth if he joined the Four Quarters, but his power would be decreased. He would become subordinate to Frank Smith. Worse, he would become a subordinate of Phelim Muldowney.

"It sounds possible," said Crumb. "What do you plan to do?"

"See Lim Lee."

"When?"

"Immediately. Why do you think I'm here?"

"You've got to wait until Sam Lee dies. He can overrule Lim Lee on anything."

"I don't 'got' to do anything, Arthur-boy. Besides, Sam Lee is in no condition to overrule his son or anyone else. He's at death's door. And if Sam Lee *can* still oversee his affairs, all Lim Lee has to do is keep my proposal secret from him."

"Lim would never keep it a secret from his father," said Crumb. "He respects and loves the old man too much. And if his father said no, Lim would repeat the same word to you. He does as his father tells him."

Muldowney laughed. He stood up, still laughing, and again walked over to the window. He looked out until he had ceased laughing, then turned and faced Crumb.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought you were," he told Crumb. "Do you seriously think a man like Lim Lee is going to let a proposition like this one by just because of a sick old man? I don't care if it is his father, he won't do it. I understand Lim Lee. We're alike, him and I. You'll never understand because you're foolish and you're weak and you just don't have enough drive. The drive to power, to riches. That's what it's all about, Arthur. I understand, and so do other leaders in our business. But you! Hah! When I threatened to go to Frank, you left Australia with your tail between your legs. I'd expected you to try to have me plugged. I would've done it to you under similar circumstances. But no, not you. You just fled."

"You don't understand Lim Lee. He is *not* like you. His values are different."

Muldowney shook his head, drew on his cigarette. "His values

and mine are the same," he said. "We'll hit it off just fine."

"But—"

"Do as you're told!" snapped Muldowney. "Set up a meeting between Lim Lee and myself for tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

"That's better. Now get out of here. I've had a hard trip and want to get cleaned up so I can go out on the town."

Crumb walked over to the door, turned to face Muldowney again. "I know you don't think much of my advice; however, I do know more about Lim Lee than you do."

"You may know more about his life and habits, mate, but you don't know his heart. I know his heart. It's the same color as mine. It wants the same things I want."

"Very well," said Crumb, "perhaps you do know more about Lim Lee's character than I. You don't know more about Singapore."

"So?"

"So you can't go into that meeting with Lim Lee cold."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," said Muldowney.

Crumb walked away from the door, back over to Muldowney. "I mean that custom dictates you present Lim Lee with a gift. It is traditional when you meet an important man at your own request."

"What sort of gift?"

"Something simple. You don't wish the gift to look like an attempt to bribe the man. On the other hand, you must not give him something too cheap, for that would be an insult. It would question his worth, the value you place upon the meeting or upon the man himself."

"That tells me exactly nothing," said Muldowney. "What you call expensive I might call inexpensive. What, precisely, should I give him?"

"I wouldn't presume to make a suggestion. If something went wrong, you would have my head in that jug of turpentine sooner than you planned. I will only say that it must be simple, yet not cheap, and that it must not be inauspicious to Mr. Lee's sign."

"His 'sign.' What are you talking about, Crumb?"

"His horoscope. If, tomorrow morning, the *Straits Times* prints a horoscope that says people born under the sign of Capricorn—Lim Lee's astrological sign—should be wary of anyone who offers them strange gifts, you should be careful that your gift is not strange."

"Yeah, now that you mention it, I was told that Lim Lee was an astrology nut."

"In Singapore, almost everyone considers astrology important."

"Okay," said Muldowney, "you made your point. So what should I give him?"

"As I said, I wouldn't dare make a suggestion. Just make it simple, but not cheap. A friend of mine gave a member of the national cabinet a pair of rustic sandals which delighted the individual, and which resulted in his receiving a handsome construction contract for a project near Orchard Road. Had he presented something cheap, like a pen, it would have been an insult to the man's worth; if he had presented something expensive, like a television set, it would have been an insult to the man's honesty. Use your own judgment, but be careful."

Crumb returned to the door and opened it to leave.

"Just a minute," said Muldowney. "How important is this gift, anyway? I mean, Lim Lee would understand that I don't know much about Singapore customs."

"If you want results, you should try to make everything perfect. Remember the old Malay proverb: '*Sa-ekor kerbau membawa lumpor, sa-kawan terpalit.*'"

"Meaning?"

"It only takes one muddy water-buffalo to smear the whole herd. . . . One mistake in protocol with a man like Lim Lee, and your plan is shot to pieces. If you don't believe anything else I say, believe that."

Crumb left.

Going down in the lift he thought about what he'd said to Muldowney. Even if Muldowney didn't take Lee a gift, he wouldn't lose anything. But if Muldowney did . . . Of course, there would be no merger, of that Crumb was sure. All the gifts in the world wouldn't bring off a merger of the Four Quarters and the Lee gang. Still, if that stupid thug did what Crumb thought he would, Crumb would be free.

Crumb spent the remainder of the morning arranging for the meeting between Muldowney and Lim Lee. He didn't tell Lee's people what the meeting would be about, only that it was a specific proposal of Muldowney's of interest to the Lee organization. He was told that Lim Lee would be informed.

At three o'clock that afternoon a member of the Lee organization called Crumb's apartment to agree to the meeting. "Ten o'clock tomorrow morning in the rear of our restaurant on High Street. You know the place?"

"Yes. I'll inform Mr. Muldowney."

"Mr. Lee will expect Mr. Muldowney to be on time and to be alone."

"It will be as Mr. Lee wishes."

And it was as Mr. Lee wished. Crumb went to Muldowney's hotel early, then drove him to the restaurant. He noticed that Muldowney had something wrapped in a sheet of green paper.

"The gift for Lim Lee?" he asked.

"Aye."

"What is it?"

"Since I couldn't make heads or tails of what you told me, I decided to get the same gift your friend got for that bureaucrat."

"A pair of rustic sandals?"

"Yeah. And he'd better be pleased or I'm holding you responsible."

"I'm sure he will be. . . . Here's the restaurant now. I'll drive five blocks up the street and park. When the meeting is over, just walk up and I'll be waiting."

Crumb pulled over to the curb. Muldowney slid out of the car and went into the restaurant. Crumb then drove five blocks and parked the car in front of a grocery store. He waited there.

He sweated terribly while he waited. But it wasn't the heat.

An hour and a half passed before the passenger door of his Toyota swung open and Phelim Muldowney fell into the seat next to him. Muldowney sat still for a minute. Apparently he'd walked too fast and, being unaccustomed to the humid air, was sweating. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped off his face and ears.

"It's hot," he said at last.

"It always is," said Crumb. "But it's less the heat than the humidity."

Muldowney looked at him coldly. "I hate people who say that."

"Sorry. . . . How did the meeting with Lim Lee go?"

Muldowney smiled in self-satisfaction. "Excellent. He didn't make any commitments, but he did listen politely. I know he's interested. I can feel it."

"Good."

Muldowney's smile vanished suddenly. "I think you tried to get me killed, Arthur-boy," he said.

"What? Are you crazy? What are you talking about?"

"That package I carried in—the gift. Some of Lee's men were waiting when I walked in and grabbed me. They thought the bloody thing was a pistol. Now, you didn't plan that, did you, Arthur?"

"Of course not."

"Yeah, I'll just bet the thought never entered your filthy little English mind."

"It didn't. I swear it. Nothing happened, right?"

"I told them it was a gift for Mr. Lee. They felt it. They could tell it wasn't steel, so they handed it back. But they continued to keep an eye on me until I passed the gift to Lim Lee."

"And did he like it?"

"He didn't say. He did look surprised. Even a bit annoyed, like the sandals weren't good enough, but he just asked if the gift was from me personally. I said it was, of course."

"Of course." Crumb started the motor. "I assure you, Muldowney, that I didn't plan for them to mistake your package for a gun. In fact, I didn't even know you decided to give Lim Lee sandals until you told me."

"Uh-huh," grunted Muldowney.

Everything happened fast after that.

Charlie Wang telephoned Crumb at eleven thirty that night to report the death of Sam Lee. He had died an hour before in the presence of two physicians and three of his sons. Lim Lee hadn't been there. He had been at the temple since noon.

"Since noon?" asked Crumb incredulously.

"Yes. Asking that his father not die. Apparently he finally realized how close to death the old man was. Either that, or he received an evil omen."

"Has he been informed yet?"

"Oh yes. He has already gone to the Lee house. He is most distraught. He really loved that old man."

"I know."

Muldowney telephoned Crumb at eight the next morning, demanding that he take him to the airport. Crumb said that his Toyota had suffered engine trouble the previous evening and was in a garage. He suggested that Muldowney take a cab.

"I don't believe you, Arthur-boy," said Muldowney. "But no matter. I'll get you for everything later—when I become the boss."

"Frank should hear all these plans you've got for being boss. I think he would be interested."

"Sure he would. But you'll never tell him. Not if you know what's good for you."

"Oh, I know what's good for me. You can bank on that."

"I doubt it. If you did, you'd disappear."

Muldowney did take a taxi to the airport. According to subsequent news reports, Phelim Muldowney arrived at the airport

shortly after eight thirty and was promptly shot dead by unknown assailants. Word spread through the secret society that the assailants were henchmen of Lim Lee's.

Less than a week later Arthur Crumb met with Charlie Wang in a restaurant on Orchard Road. Crumb owed Charlie Wang. And Arthur Crumb always paid his debts.

"You'll be the new representative of the Four Quarters in Singapore," Crumb told Wang. "I've cleared your appointment with Frank Smith."

"Your generosity astounds me."

"You did me a favor, Charlie, so I'm doing you one. That's all there is to it. We're even now."

"I'm still ignorant of what favor I did that has resulted in such bounty for my humble self. . . . What about you, Mr. Crumb? Where are you going now?"

"Home to Sydney. I'm to be Frank Smith's new chief lieutenant, and the number two man in the Four Quarters Syndicate."

"Ah," said Wang. "Then you replace Mr. Muldowney."

"Yes."

"I was most saddened to hear of the death of your friend," said Wang. "But Lim was furious with him. He brought bad luck upon the house of Lee. Death. Lim Lee went to the temple to try to ward it off, but to no avail."

"Come now, Charlie, surely a practical man like yourself isn't taken in by stories of bad luck and good luck."

Charlie Wang smiled without answering.

"I hope," continued Crumb, "that Mr. Lee doesn't hold me responsible in any way for his father's death."

"Oh, no, he knows it was the terrible Mr. Muldowney alone who killed his father. After Lim Lee opened the package that Mr. Muldowney gave him, he asked him whose idea it was to give him such a gift. Mr. Muldowney said that the gift came from no one but himself."

"That's true."

"Imagine!" said Charlie Wang. "Giving a man such a gift. A man with a close relative on the brink of dying!"

"Sandals make good gifts," observed Crumb.

"These were rustic sandals! Sandals worn at funerals! Surely Mr. Muldowney knew that such a gift was bad luck, that it would bring death."

Crumb smiled. "Let's just say, Charlie, that he found out."

Nothing Might Happen!

by Isaac Asimov



Illustration by Arthur George

Samuel Gelderman had been working quite diligently for five years toward the goal of becoming a millionaire. Many people do so with varying degrees of hope, some in one way, some in another. Sam's hope was high, but his method of achieving his goal was exceptionally tedious, for he served as secretary and odd-jobs man to his uncle, the well-known writer of espionage-suspense novels, Ralph Gelderman.

Ralph was not a flashy, best-selling writer. His books did not explode onto the scene in sprays of obvious money-making. He might even be considered rather obscure. This did not displease Sam, however, for Ralph was something better than a best-selling writer: he was a prolific one whose books were smooth and reliable. Each one sold moderately steadily, remaining in print for a long time, and gathering paperback editions, foreign sales, and movie options along the way.

If Ralph had been more obviously successful, he might have slowly collected a large staff about himself and he might then have developed numerous ways of spending a large percentage of his money before he passed from this earthly scene.

As it was, his professional advance had been so gradual

that it had never occurred to Ralph to be anything but a one-man production machine. Nor did it occur to him to alter his generally frugal way of life. The result was that each year the number of his books in print accumulated, and each year he made a little more than the year before, and each year his investments and assets increased appreciably. He remained a bachelor, too, showing no signs of any impatience with his marital status as his years advanced.

And Sam, the orphaned son of Ralph's older brother, was Ralph's only close relative and his obvious sole heir.

Five years ago, Ralph had finally been persuaded by his accountant to form a small corporation, with himself as president and treasurer. He needed a second officer and it was then that he asked Sam to become, officially, what he had been on and off in an informal way for quite a while—his secretary. That became Sam's corporation title.

The duties were tedious, for Sam had to take care of accounts, of publishing records, of correspondence, of routine dealings with publishers, editors, and agents, and also with a certain querulousness on the part of his uncle.

On the brighter side, he re-

ceived a moderately decent salary, which, with the small inheritance he had received from his father, enabled him to live with his wife and teenage daughter in modest comfort, if not in splendor. Much more to the point, his position enabled Sam to know the exact nature of his uncle's income, investments, and assets and he was astonished. It was far greater than he had imagined—and it enabled him to bear with his uncle's occasionally unreasonable whims with the patience of a saint.

It was, moreover, a source of gratifying reassurance to Sam to know that, as the only other officer of the corporation, he would at once have its assets available to him on his uncle's decease—as well as inheriting, in more tedious fashion, the pre-corporation earnings.

What was a source of deep chagrin to Sam, however, was that the happy denouement was not imminent. Ralph Gelderman was sixty, but in robust health. He might well live on for another quarter century. Sam himself was forty-two and was, he had to admit, *not* in robust health. Even if he survived his uncle, he might well be an old and sickly survivor, unable to get much use out of his inheritance. To be sure, the older Ralph grew, the larger the es-

tate would be, but what if, as senility approached, he grew suddenly enamored of some charming young lady who found his wealth and his shortening life expectancy irresistible? Sam would find himself cut off with a small legacy.

Under such circumstances, Sam could not help but meditate on how convenient it would be if a kindly Providence were to carry Ralph off in the very near future; if a building cornice were to fall on him, or an automobile were to collide with him, or some virus were to attack him with unaccustomed ferocity.

It might have seemed logical for Sam to ruminate on the possibility of helping Providence along by some action of his own, but he did not like to think of such things. He was not a vicious man, he told himself, but above and beyond that, as sole heir, he himself would be the immediate and obvious suspect if anything untoward happened to Ralph. He could not possibly withstand that. Nor could he avoid it by faking a faultless alibi, or by working out a murder method that would look like suicide or accident. He just didn't have that kind of mind.

He couldn't even go through the unthinkable process of hiring a paid killer to do the job for him. Aside from lacking the

funds for it, or the knowledge of how and where to find such a person, he did not wish to put his life into the hands of a potential blackmailer.

He sighed and realized he would simply have to content himself with hoping that Providence would do the job for him, and to watch, wistfully, as the years slipped away.

And then, much to his own astonishment, he thought of a perfect method for murder, the *perfect* murder—not a flaw in it, not a danger, not a care.

It happened this way. . . .

The intercom signal had sounded one day, two years ago, and Sam had picked up the receiver and said, "Yes, uncle."

"Sam, come up here."

The voice in Sam's ear was testy, but Sam felt no cause for alarm. He had just skillfully managed to cancel a potential photography session and Ralph had grumped his thanks for it. Ralph detested photographers and cameras, and never yielded to the necessity of having his picture taken except under conditions of overwhelming force.

To Sam's gentle suggestion that this sort of personal publicity might help sales of his books, Ralph growled impatiently and said, "I don't want that kind of sale. I want my books to be successful on their own. I want *them* well-known, not me."

It was for that reason that Ralph Gelderman never became a household face, so to speak, and that his photographs on book jackets tended to be old ones, taken before middle age and continued success had hardened his stubbornness.

So Sam, following instructions, as he always did, had quashed the photography matter, and was surely in favor now.

He climbed the flight of stairs to Ralph's neat and well-organized writing room (always referred to as his office), and said, "Yes, uncle?"

Ralph thrust a letter at him with a discontented air. "Why am I plagued with this?"

Sam tightened his lips slightly in chagrin. It was well understood that fan mail (except for those unusually intelligent and complimentary items that Ralph rather enjoyed reading) was to be kept away from him. Sam, by long practice, could take care of it himself, knowing which should be answered and which not. Those he answered, he knew exactly how to answer, and then he would take those answers to Ralph for his signature. Nor did Ralph bother to read them. He merely signed.

It was not really a safe procedure, and Sam had at one time made the careful observation that it was not good practice to sign anything with-

out reading it.

Ralph had put down his pen. "If I can't trust you, I'll have to fire you. Can I trust you?"

"Of course, uncle. I was merely making a general statement." But for a while, it had scared him out of making such general statements.

And now he had accidentally allowed a fan letter to reach his uncle, and it was one of the "crackpot" items; a careless oversight.

"Here's a man," said Ralph, peering at the signature, "named Lawrence K. Leghorn, who seems to be convinced that there is an active Communist conspiracy affecting the grade schools in his town out in Long Island somewhere, and he wants me to join him in squelching it. Apparently he confuses me with my fictional characters and wants to meet me for dinner, which, by the way, he doesn't offer to pay for. Am I getting many letters like this?"

"One or two, uncle. Not many."

"Well, I don't want to see the letters. And I certainly don't want to see the writers of such letters. Just send them a polite squelch. Make sure it's polite, but make sure it's a *squelch*."

"That's exactly what I try to do, uncle. This won't happen again."

"Good. See to that!"

Sam nodded and turned. As

always, Ralph looked depressingly vigorous and a good ten years younger than his age. His full head of hair was dark and unfrosted, as Sam's was, and the distinct family resemblance was all in the older man's favor.

Sam sighed, went to his own office on the lower floor of the duplex apartment on Manhattan's upper east side, and read the letter again.

It was clearly the work of a paranoid personality. A surprising number of them wrote letters to Ralph Gelderman. Perhaps it was the spy-suspense that drew them out of the woodwork; there was no question but that espionage tales fostered paranoia.

The proper reaction to letters by such people was inaction. There was no point in replying to a paranoid personality. Any reply was a provocation.

Occasionally, though, they would write again—and even again. They would complain that their letters were being stolen by post office employees, or re-routed by malign influences working through long-range radio beams. It then became necessary to send a very brief note to the effect that their letters had been received.

And in the case of this Mr. Leghorn, Ralph had specifically ordered an answer to be sent, and he would expect to sign it.

Sam sighed again, and set

himself to the job of thinking out an answer. A polite one—*Dear so-and-so—heavily over-extended—deadlines—no time whatever—deeply regret cannot meet with you—not a matter in which I can concern myself—*

It had to be done very delicately, for there was no telling what a paranoid personality might do, once affronted. If they thought you were part of the conspiracy . . .

It was at that moment that Sam achieved his blinding insight.

Of course! No telling what they might do. They might, unbribed and of their own accord, impelled by their own madness, serve the role of the falling cornice or of any of the other convenient accidents Sam dreamed of.

Why, then, be polite to this Leghorn? Why not be provocative—without being blatantly so, of course?

Excitedly, he scribbled out a note in longhand. "Dear Sir: Any meeting between ourselves is quite out of the question. Please do not waste your time in repeating this request, as it is clear to me that your suspicions with regard to conspiratorial activity are quite without foundation."

Good! Short, even curt! And a distinct sneer, too.

Uncle Ralph would sign it

and off it would go. Leghorn would then find himself with a deep grievance against Ralph Gelderman and, in all likelihood, something of a suspicion that Ralph was himself part of the dangerous Communist conspiracy. If he wrote again, Sam would answer again—appropriately.

It was perfect. Sam could use similar tactics on every letter of the sort that came in—one or two a week, usually.

For two years now, Sam had followed this procedure—and he had enjoyed it. Each day's mail was an adventure. Would a new letter come from an old name? Would a new crackpot make his appearance?

Some stopped, but others started, and there were always half a dozen in being, with emotions to be played upon skillfully. Sam grew to admire his own light touch, his ability to irritate these people without seeming to be doing so deliberately. He didn't answer too soon or too harshly, and he rejoiced every time he elicited an unreasonable response. The more unreasonable, the more he could hope.

Leghorn himself, the first case, was the best. There were times when for a month at a time, there would be nothing from him. Sam would decide that the crackpot had tired of the game, but then, eventually,

there would come the familiar envelope with the hand-printed address.

Nor did Ralph ever read the answers. He merely signed. He was so uninterested that he spoke of having a rubber stamp designed so that Sam could manage it all. Always, though, Sam put in a quiet objection to that. After all, Sam said, the actual authentic signature was precious to his readers. They should not be deprived of that. Ralph snorted, but complied.

Sam, after all, needed the authentic signature. It must always be a reasonable assumption that Ralph had dictated the letters—there was the neatly-typed RG/sg at the lower left—that he read the answers once they were prepared, and that he signed them with his own hand. A stamp would ruin everything.

And, after all, ninety-nine out of every hundred letters that were sent off to readers over his signature were totally harmless.

Sam made sure that, at parties, he entertained different friends with stories of the odd letters Ralph received. Such stories were authentically amusing, and the friends laughed. Then, turning sober, Sam would, ever so gently, deprecate Ralph's tendency to be cruel or cutting in his answers. He himself (he explained) did

his best to soften the answers, but Ralph always objected to that.

Sam did not do this too often. He did not overdo. Just once in a reasonable while; just enough to make it likely that someone would remember if the time should come when such remembering would be useful. It would all tend to indicate that it was clearly all Ralph's fault—over Sam's objections.

At one time, a friend said, on such an occasion, "Isn't that sort of thing dangerous? What if one of these crackpots gets mad enough to try to beat up your uncle? The return address must be on the stationery."

Sam rejoiced inwardly at that. He shook his head and said, "I do worry about that on occasion, but most of them live far away and the letters they write tend to blow off steam and reduce their internal pressure, I suppose. Just the same, I did try to warn Uncle Ralph once about that very point, and he all but bit my head off. I can't cross him too much, you know. He's the boss."

It was *perfect*. What if someone with murder in his heart *did* come to see Ralph? And if Ralph were killed?

How on earth could any blame be attached to Sam in that case? He could produce the entire body of correspondence, and it would all pile the guilt on Ralph

himself. Sam, everyone would say, had actually tried to save Ralph from himself.

It was not just his own statements to his friends, either. On several occasions, Sam had written two letters, one blatantly and crudely provocative, and the other more diplomatic by several notches—yet not actually designed to cool the fires. Only the first was signed, but only the second, milder one was mailed, with a scrawled initial G. Copies of both remained in the files, and Sam could explain that he had hesitated to send the first, and had sent the second instead, on his own responsibility and at the risk of his job, and that he had scrawled the G himself.

Far from being blamed, Sam would be overwhelmed with assurances that it was not his fault and that he must not blame himself. Even the police would surely say so.

And the best part of this plan for the perfect murder was that *nothing might happen*. No madman might appear with the desire to kill gnawing at his heart. Ralph might safely live on indefinitely. This meant that Sam need not live on for years with the gnawings of conscience poisoning his life. He was just playing a game—not an innocent, harmless one, perhaps, but one that would probably turn out to be so in fact, if not

in intent. It had, after all, been harmless for two years now.

Indeed, the game did Ralph a service, for it kept Sam from longing uselessly for his uncle's death, and perhaps being drawn to murder, eventually. As it was, the game gave Sam the feeling of doing something about his problem, and made him happy. It made it unnecessary for him to do anything else. In a way, it might be saving Uncle Ralph's life, and it was that thought that enabled Sam to turn to the day's mail with a light heart and to continue the game without feeling shame.

He was about to turn to the mail now, when the house phone rang.

Sam picked it up. Ralph was away at his publisher's office, but it would have been Sam's job to pick it up even if Ralph had been in his office upstairs.

"Yes?"

"Delivery, Mr. Gelderman, from Prime Publishers."

Sam groaned inwardly. It would be another bound galley of a book for which Ralph would be asked to compose a promotional statement. Ralph never did so, but neither did publishers ever give up. And it would be up to Sam himself to compose a tactful reply for the hundredth time. It wouldn't do to irritate a publisher.

"Is the delivery man still there?"

"Yes, Mr. Gelderman."

"Well, send him up."

The doorbell sounded its subdued chime two minutes later, and Sam went to the door.

The delivery man at the door, middle-aged, nondescript, held out the package. "Mr. Gelderman?"

"Yes," said Sam, impatiently. "Do you want me to sign something?"

He was suddenly aware that the package, whatever it was, was empty. It squeezed together without resistance under his fingers. "What is this?—Hey what are you doing?"

The delivery man had stepped inside, shouldering Sam to one side, and closed the door behind him.

He said, "My name is Lawrence Leghorn, and I'm here to see you, Mr. Ralph Gelderman."

Sam's stomach tightened. The crackpot! Possibly intent on assault and battery! He said,

huskily. "You're wrong. I'm not Ralph Gelderman. I'm his secretary. Mr. Gelderman is not in."

Leghorn's eyes narrowed, and he seized Sam's wrist in a surprisingly strong grip. "The doorman called you Gelderman, and you just told me you were Gelderman."

"I'm Sam Gelderman."

"You just said you were his secretary."

"I *am* his secretary. I'm also his nephew, so I have the same name. On the letters it says 'RG/sg.' I'm 'sg.'"

Leghorn hesitated for a moment. Then he said, "It's your picture on the books."

"It's an old picture and there's a family resemblance, but he's twenty years older than I am," said Sam, wildly.

Leghorn thought for a moment. Then he said, "I don't believe you!" He pulled a handgun out of his pocket and fired—not at all wildly.

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by Mary Cannon

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DOROTHY L. SAYERS

He stands under five feet nine, and he's sensitive about his height, though he admits to vanity when it comes to his finely sculpted hands. His monocle is actually a powerful magnifying glass, and his walking stick camouflages a measuring stick, a compass, and a deadly sword that can be pulled out (but never is) at a moment's notice. His middle name is "Death," which is also his hobby in a way, along with cricket, bibliophily, and music.

He was born in England in 1890, although he didn't make his first appearance in print until the early 1920's. He was educated at Eton and Balliol, Oxford, and graduated with First-Class Honors. The inter-

ruption of World War I brought him decorations, the pain of a broken love affair—and Bunter, his trusty orderly-turned-valet, who saved his captain's life in France, and then nursed his master back to health in a bachelor flat in Piccadilly.

Our hero is titled but happy in the fact that he's the second son and unlikely to inherit the dukedom, with its attendant responsibilities. In the first novel about him, an eminent psychiatrist advises him to "learn irresponsibility" as the best medicine for shellshock. The advice is sound, and had been our hero's instinctive self-therapy even before it was spoken. He's the first to admit that he "bubbles," and loves inane chatter. He also appreciates the

pleasures his wealth and freedom buy. He owns a Daimler and relishes driving too fast for his passengers' peace of mind.

At age forty he is smitten with love for a young woman on trial for the murder of her ex-lover. Our amateur sleuth seeks out the real culprit and frees his beloved. She, however, doubly burdened by guilt and gratitude, honorably refuses his persistent proposals of marriage. For five years (and even more novels) these two share suppers, books, and murder cases. Harriet is a mystery novelist with a curiosity for crime that matches her would-be lover's, and a penchant for stumbling onto corpses. The courtship, highly intellectual and unconventional, is also one of the most romantic and sophisticated in fiction. Dorothy Sayers, his creator, once said, "If I could have found a man to my measure, I could have put a torch to the world." This she did for her two major characters.

He's described as "a respectable scholar in five or six languages, a musician of some skill, expert in toxicology, man-about-town . . . and a common sensualist." He has a long face; amiable, cold gray eyes; and a long chin, and he's forever joking and quoting snippets of verse. It's a habit that endears him to his dotty mother, the Dowager Duchess, whose own

speech patterns are alarmingly incoherent. But both mother and son shamelessly drive his sister-in-law ("a scrawny, overbred prude") to distraction. To those who love him, his speech brings a smile to the lips. I number myself in this group.

His patience is boundless, his courtesy bottomless, his tailoring impeccable. His family's crest has three mice, and a domestic cat crouched as if to spring. The motto beneath is: "As my Whimsey takes me." His name, of course, is Lord Peter Wimsey.

If you haven't read the short stories and eleven novels that feature Lord Peter, then this is the ideal season to do so. The holidays are a time of giving, and these novels have much to give. Sayers' murder plots are ingenious, and almost defy solutions. Her characters are many and richly varied; her ear for local dialects—and her ability to transfer them to the printed page—adds much to the tale-telling. Her psychology is complex and always credible, and her portraits are drawn with the gentle strokes of satire that one associates with novels of manners. Her backgrounds are colorful, and take readers to a different spot with each book.

And there's much merrymaking in these books, not of the slapstick variety but, rather,

literate comedy derived either from the precise way Sayers expresses herself through dialogue, or from Lord Peter's zany view of his world. There's Miss Climpson, for example. Peter leads Parker to her flat, letting Parker (the young Scotland Yard inspector who weds into the Wimsey family) believe he's to meet Peter's mistress. Instead he finds Miss Climpson, a sharp, middle-aged spinster whom Peter employs as secretary and sometimes-undercover investigator. Peter's theory is that people will gossip to a harmless old spinster when they'll refuse to talk to the police, or even to a titled sleuth. This small office grows (by later novels) into a large organization of unattached women, all employed by Lord Peter and managed by Miss Climpson. She tells Parker at one point that she expects there will someday be a statue of Lord Peter Wimsey, inscribed "To the Man Who Made Thousands of Superfluous Women Happy Without Injury to Their Modesty or Exertion to Himself." That is the kind of perfectly wonderful fun to be had in these books.

Whose Body? introduced Lord Peter Wimsey to the world, so you should begin there. In this book Peter jests that it might one day prove handy to have a 'tec in the family, and sure

enough, *Clouds of Witness* requires him to save his elder brother from an accusation of murder. (Sayers describes in it the rigamarole of putting a British peer on trial, an entirely different procedure from a commoner's trial.) Next came *Unnatural Death*, a case that opens classically when a stranger in a restaurant confides to Peter and friend Parker his suspicions about the recent death of an infirm heiress. *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* begins when an old general is discovered in his usual club chair where he has apparently been—dead and unnoticed—for an entire day. *Strong Poison* introduces Harriet Vane, on trial for her life. *The Five Red Herrings* finds Peter in a small Scottish village of fishermen and artists where murder mars the view; the key lies in the reconstruction of the suspects' timetables. *Have His Carcase* is set in a British seaside resort, and opens when Harriet finds a bleeding corpse atop a rock, with the tide rapidly rising. Peter goes undercover in *Murder Must Advertise*, working as a copywriter (a job that Sayers herself had for several years). *The Nine Tailors*, one of my favorites, is set in fen country, and has a roaring flood and lots of information about the ancient art of bell-pulling. *Gaudy Night* is really Harriet's

novel. She returns to her alma mater at Oxford to investigate a nasty poison-pen campaign; Peter comes down to assist her—and propose, once again. This time, however, Harriet accepts. Finally there's *Busman's Honeymoon*, which details Peter and Harriet's wedding, and their arrival at their honeymoon cottage in the country—a disastrous event, with an unstocked larder, and a cellar

stocked with—what else?—a corpse.

I shall always think of Lord Peter Wimsey as he was once described: "Sleek with breakfast, sunshine and sentiment." It's the kind of contentment you'll feel, too, if you make your acquaintance with these novels.

(All the Lord Peter Wimsey novels and stories are available in Avon paperback editions.)

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Jane Dentinger has drawn from her own theatrical background for the scene of her first crime novel, and *Murder on Cue* is a real curtain-raiser. The cast of characters is familiar, but no less engaging for that: heroine Jocelyn O'Roarke, the talented understudy who lands the best role of her career when murder strikes; prima donna Harriet Weldon, the leading lady whose vanity threatens to ruin the whole project; the handsome male co-star; a beleaguered stage director; an aging male matinee idol. The list goes on, even including an appealing N.Y.C. cop who would be any casting director's dream choice to star opposite the spunky Jocelyn. There are plenty of details about Broadway plays, sprinkled with soap opera-like secrets from everyone's past, to keep the murder plot moving along at a smart pace. Murder-behind-the-scenes—or devilment-in-the-wings, if you prefer—isn't new, but Dentinger proves that there's still an audience for a fresh twist to this old standby. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95, 180 pp.)

W. J. Burley's *Death in Willow Pattern* is a British reprint that stars Dr. Henry Pym, scholar, writer, and amateur criminologist, accompanied once again by his pretty and bright secretary, Susan. The setting is contemporary England, but the framework is definitely classic, and will remind you of other books comfortably thumbed, because the real mystery lies somewhere in the past—and in the secret heart of someone in the present—of Peel Place, a wealthy and isolated country mansion. Pym and Susan are houseguests for the Christmas holidays, supposedly invited so that Pym can catalog the family's collection of natural history

volumes. But there's obviously more than rare books on their host's mind. Two local girls have "gone missing," and someone is writing nasty letters suggesting that one of the present male occupants of Peel Place is responsible. There's no real proof, but the rumors have stirred up local feeling because an eighteenth century ancestor *was* known to have indulged in sadistic sexual practices. There are some interesting suspects, some intriguing false trails, and, finally, the kidnapping of a pretty Chinese nurse who was staying on the estate. An eighteenth century Chinese "folly," a chilling old journal, some rare art objects, and a sinister secret room all add spice to the stew. (Walker British Mystery, \$2.95, 191 pp.)

Death of a Minor Character reunites sympathetic Virginia Freer with Felix, her irrepressible and totally irresponsible ex, so that the unlikely (and often uneasy) team can once again catch a murderer. Virginia finds herself in the unhappy position of having known two recent murder victims who were killed almost back-to-back. Yet, she reasonably tells herself, what could a married antiques dealer in her suburban town have in common with a kind, elderly spinster who lived downstairs from Felix's London flat? E.X. Ferrars serves up a suitably puzzling plot and peoples it with some interesting folks. The real fun, though, lies in the offbeat relationship between the married-but-estranged Freers, certainly a fresh pair of sleuths. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95, 183 pp.)

Mad Hatter Summer (Viking Press, \$15.75) by Donald Thomas is an exceptional mystery novel, finely crafted and fresh in its approach. The setting is high summer in Oxford, England, in 1879, a charming scene of ivy-covered buildings, picnics on the Thames, quiet walks in the quadrangles, and formal teas in the private rooms of the dons of Christ Church. The plot is masterfully of a piece with the period, especially the Victorian views toward sex; and real characters crowd the stage with fictional ones. Most notably there is the notorious Victorian blackmailer, Charles Augustus Howell, and his newest victim, none other than the Reverend C. L. Dodgson of Christ Church, Oxford, better known to modern readers as Lewis Carroll. The creator of *Alice in Wonderland* is a wonderful creation himself in these pages, an innocent bachelor and great friend to many little girls, some of whom have been the subjects of his artistic "life" photographs. Scotland Yard Inspector Alfred Swain is, more than Dodgson himself, acutely aware of how precarious is the writer's reputation—and even his personal freedom; and he fights bravely to protect both. A fascinating historical mystery, elegantly told.

OFF THE RECORD

NO TRAP SO DEADLY: RECURRING DEVICES IN THE PRIVATE EYE STORY

by Loren D. Estleman



"Who is this Hemingway person at all?"

"A guy that keeps saying the same thing over and over until you begin to believe it must be good."

—Raymond Chandler,
Farewell, My Lovely.

Skillful repetition, as anyone knows who has ever been trapped in front of his television set when a commercial aired, is the most effective method of getting one's message across. Generals as far back as Attila saw the wisdom of dispatching several couriers bearing the same command in the heat of battle to ensure that one got through to the subordinate for whom it was intended. Charles Dickens and Gertrude Stein applied redundancy to literary purpose, but

nowhere in the world of letters is the incessant hammering home of themes more apparent than in the work of those men whose prose stepped from the pulp pages of the twenties and thirties to redirect the course of American fiction.

One constant in the American private eye story is its freeway structure. While the mysteries of the classic English school are told backwards, beginning with the discovery of the murder victim and retracing the steps that led to the crime, the hardboiled thriller brings its detective into an ongoing case at an angle, much as a freeway ramp allows the motorist to enter the flow of traffic without stopping. The mystery continues moving and thickening even as the man charged with solving it accelerates, des-

Loren D. Estleman, author of—among other things—a series of mystery novels and stories featuring Detroit private eye Amos Walker, here continues his discussion of the private eye in American literature. His first article on the subject, "Plus Expenses: The Private Eye as Great American Hero," appeared in AHMM in September, 1983.

perately trying to match the speed of events. The result, far from the atmosphere of genteel leisure that surrounds the efforts of the English puzzle-solver, is a quality of frantic helplessness, the recurring nightmare in which the dreamer—in this case, the private eye and the readers who identify with him—finds himself running as hard as he can but advancing at a turtle's pace against a racing clock. Raymond Chandler called this quality "the smell of fear."

The private eye story almost never opens with anything so final as a murder. Partly this is because homicide is outside the civilian investigator's jurisdiction, but from a dramatic viewpoint, death is a release to be withheld until the tension with which the story begins reaches a certain pitch. Even then, the language of discovery has undergone an electric change from gentler days. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Conan Doyle's archetypal Briton, Dr. Watson, describes the murder scene this way:

It was a large square room, looking all the larger from the absence of all furniture. A vulgar flaring paper adorned the walls, but it was blotched in places with mildew, and here and there great strips had become detached

and hung down, exposing the yellow plaster beneath. . . .

All these details I observed afterwards. At present my attention was centered upon the single, grim, motionless figure which lay stretched upon the boards, with vacant, sightless eyes staring up at the discolored ceiling. . . .

Chandler's Philip Marlowe put it more succinctly in *The Big Sleep*:

Neither of the two people in the room paid any attention to the way I came in, although only one of them was dead.

The revelation, tossed off at the end of a suspenseful passage that begins with a mysterious flash of light, a woman's scream, and shots overheard from outside, is an unexpectedly humorous pressure-breaker. The casual stoicism with which the detective encounters violent death is a hallmark of the form. Dashiell Hammett's *The Dain Curse* presents the Continental Op cataloguing a corpse along with the rest of the scenery:

. . . I saw the bush twenty feet below. It was perched on the top of a stunted tree that grew almost parallel to the cliff, fresh brown earth stick-

ing to the bush's roots. The next thing that caught my eye was also brown—a soft hat lying upside down between two pointed gray rocks, halfway down to the water. I looked at the bottom of the cliff and saw the feet and legs.

Lew Archer, Ross Macdonald's Marlovian knight errant, reflects the Chandler influence. In *The Ivory Grin*:

The second pass-key I tried opened the door. My light flashed on the ivory grin of death.

Mickey Spillane, however, mixed Doyleesque grotesquery with modern American blunt terminology when *I, the Jury's* Mike Hammer views his friend's remains:

I threw back the sheet anyway and a curse caught in my throat. Jack was in shorts; his one hand still clutching his belly in agony. The bullet went in clean, but where it came out left a hole big enough to cram a fist into.

The stumbled-upon corpse is a staple of the hardboiled mystery, and readers well versed in the form generally know what's coming when the detective lets himself into an empty house or

apartment. At rock bottom there are two offstage murders per story (Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*); on rare occasions they come in dozens (Hammett's *Red Harvest*). By *Playback*, Philip Marlowe's seventh book-length adventure, he has seen enough cold flesh to have acquired precognition:

... I tried the knob. Nobody had locked the door. I pushed it open and went in. I had that feeling. I was going to find something nasty inside.

Very often the deaths stem indirectly from the detective's actions, lending him a seamy culpability that is spared the fastidious clean-up crews of the English school. Although it's involuntary, even the hero is not immune to the stench of corruption. For this reason, his inevitable beating assumes the importance of a purification rite. This ranges from the phallic symbolism of Marlowe's pistol-whipping at the hands of phony spiritualist Jules Amthor in *Farewell, My Lovely* (and subsequent drug nightmare, courtesy of the Bay City police) to the raw brutality of Ned Beaumont's pummeling by the sadistic Jeff in Hammett's *The Glass Key*:

Jeff in his underwear,

barefoot, came in. "Ain't you a pip?" he said. "Always up to some kind of tricks. Don't you never get tired of being bounced off the floor?" He took Beaumont by the throat with his left hand and struck him in the face with his right fist, twice, but not so hard as he had hit him before. Then he pushed him backwards over to the bed and threw him on it. "And stay put a while this time," he growled. . . .

Painfully Ned Beaumont climbed out of bed and made his way to the door. He tried it. Then he withdrew two steps and tried to hurl himself against it, succeeding only in lurching against it. He kept trying until the door was flung open again by Jeff.

Jeff said: "I never seen a guy that liked being hit so much or that I liked hitting so much." He leaned far over to one side and swung his fist up from below his knee.

Ned Beaumont stood blindly in the fist's path. . . .

The scene goes on and on, the ritualistic beating purging the hero like a baptism in his own blood. At no time do these Zen-like protagonists take on such depth as when something is being done to them. Perhaps this is one reason why Mike Hammer, who traces his literary ancestry more to Jeff than

to either Marlowe or the Continental Op, remains the comic-strip character Spillane originally intended him to be. *The Big Kill* reveals him in his perennial role as aggressor:

. . . I snapped the side of the rod across his jaw and laid the flesh open to the bone. He dropped the sap, and staggered into the big boy with a scream starting to come up out of his throat, only to have it cut off in the middle as I pounded his teeth back into his mouth with the end of the barrel. . . . He got so mad he came right at me with his head down and I took my own damn time about kicking him in the face. . . .

Hammer suffers for lack of reader sympathy. There is nothing to separate him from his enemies, and his much-vaunted sense of outraged justice is merely ego. Because he is incapable of either sensitivity or self-doubt, much less fear, he has no place to go and so retains the blunt, one-dimensional quality of a fist. He is the stuff and not the victim of nightmare.

The helpless frustration that Hammer's less cartoony colleagues have in abundance is most frightening when the detective loses consciousness in the presence of his enemies. He

is continually getting knocked on the head in strange surroundings. Reports Marlowe, in *The Lady in the Lake*:

... The scene exploded into fire and darkness. I didn't even remember being slugged. Fire and darkness and just before the darkness a sharp flash of nausea.

When the hero comes to alone in a familiar place or in the place where he was hit (usually with a sap, but almost as often with the butt or barrel of a gun; on rare occasions, *à la* Hammett's Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, he is drugged), the reader's relief is orgasmic. When he awakes still in his opponent's clutches, the nightmare takes on a deeper shade of black. Worse things are coming. In *Nightmare in Pink*, John D. MacDonald took the Dantesque narcotics scene in *Farewell, My Lovely* into a hell far beyond Chandler's pioneer vision:

I saw a tiny mark appear at her hair line, right in the center of her forehead. It moved slowly down her forehead, and as it did so the two flaps of flesh folded away at either side, bloody pink where they were exposed, displaying the hard white shine of ivory bone. The moving line parted her brows, bisected

her nose and lips and chin, and the halved damp soft flesh fell away leaving the white skull, the black sockets where the eyes had been. The jaws and teeth were exposed in a white death grin, but the jaw still worked and the pink tongue was still moist within that sepulchral dryness, curling, saying, "Darling, darling."

It is the beginning of a descent into a mad world that will have "salvage consultant" Travis McGee waking up screaming for many months. He has, of course, been taken in by a woman—a staple going back to Carroll John Daly's Race Williams, America's first hardboiled private eye, and his never-ending duel with Florence Drummond, "the Girl with the Criminal Mind." Women are often symbols of evil in the genre, whether as instigators or tools or simple catalysts. Much has been made of Chandler's misogyny, and indeed a strong case can be constructed on either the coldblooded ruthlessness of *Farewell, My Lovely's* Velma Valento or the nymphomaniacal psychopathy of Carmen Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*, but Hammett's was far more blatant. "All women are dark," declares the Op, and he proves it in adventure after adventure, trotting out an army

of dimwitted thugs and cracksmen elevated to high villainy by the swish of a petticoat. Chandler could and did present women as innocent victims; the closest Hammett came to this was the plight of Gabrielle Leggett, finessed as a child into murdering her mother so that her father's mistress may have the man she lusts after, and it is evident early in *The Dain Curse* that he means for us to have no sympathy for the warped drug fiend Gabrielle has grown into. *The High Window* gave Chandler the opportunity to experiment with this same motif, but here the victim, Merle Davis, is a timid girl raised to accept guilt for a murder committed by her guardian, Elizabeth Bright Murdock. Thus is the taint diluted.

Part of the detective's appeal is his refusal to be taken in by appearances, especially where women are concerned. Sam Spade is capable of falling in love, but not so deeply that his sleuth's eye is blinded. "You're good," he sneers, at the end of a tearful feminine performance that would melt the heart of a Dr. Watson or even a Race Williams. Given the choice of protecting the woman he loves or "sending her over" to the police for his partner's murder at the close of *The Maltese Falcon*, Spade opts for the latter course. Faced with the identical situa-

tion in *I, the Jury*, Mike Hammer blows a hole through her.

Marlowe, however, goes them one better, declining to love a woman until her innocence is plain. In *The Big Sleep* his heart goes out to Eddie Mars's wife (whom he calls "Silver-Wig" in a kind of symbolic divorce from the gangster), and he entertains romantic notions toward Mavis Weld in *The Little Sister*, but a guiltless Linda Loring is required to break his vestal virginity in *The Long Goodbye* and to make him announce, in *Playback*: "The air was full of music." The others are only objects of his constant search for damsels in distress.

Among the genre's leaders, this need to defend the weak is unique to Chandler's Marlowe and his literary offspring, Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer. In Marlowe the symptoms are classic. *The Big Sleep* allows him to deal with that melodramatic standard, the female hostage, at the sacrifice of his regard for the sanctity of life:

... He grunted something and the girl's body jerked hard, as though he had jammed a gun into her back. She came on again and drew near the lightless car. I could see him behind her now, his hat, a side of his face, the bulk of his shoulder. The girl stopped rigid and screamed.

A beautiful thin tearing scream that rocked me like a left hook.

"I can see him!" she screamed. "Through the window. Behind the wheel, Lash!"

He fell for it like a bucket of lead. He knocked her roughly to one side and jumped forward, throwing his hand up. Three more spurts of flame cut the darkness. More glass scarred. . . .

I said: "Finished?"

He whirled at me. Perhaps it would have been nice to allow him another shot or two, just like a gentleman of the old school. But his gun was up and I couldn't wait any longer. Not long enough to be a gentleman of the old school. I shot him four times. . . .

As late as 1971, thirty-two years after publication of *The Big Sleep* and twelve years after Raymond Chandler's death, Matt Helm, Donald Hamilton's private eye-like espionage agent, would find himself in the same position, but with less need to moralize:

He'd dragged Bobbie Prince out of the Jeepster, and had pushed her down the road ahead of him until they were clear of the clouds of steam and other fumes billowing from the crippled vehicle. Now

he was standing there with a gun—presumably his big .44 Magnum although I couldn't see it—thrust into her back. . . .

"Drop it, Helm! Drop it or I'll shoot her!"

It was the same old tired routine. They will keep on trying it. One day I'll have to sit down and count how many times it's been tried on me. . . .

"Stop right there, or I'll blow her spine right out through her belly!"

I lifted my gun and shot him in the right eye.

The lone detective's shadowy existence in the half-world between the cops and the crooks is a major theme. Says Daly's Race Williams, in *The Hidden Hand*:

People—especially the police—don't understand me. And what we don't understand we don't appreciate. The police look upon me as being so close to the criminal that you can't tell the difference. . . .

His attitude toward the watchdogs of law and order has evolved from the amused contempt with which Sherlock Holmes viewed the bungling of Scotland Yard to wary contempt on the part of Philip Marlowe, who knows full well the

power of the Los Angeles and Bay City police to deprive him of his livelihood and even his freedom, to just plain contempt as Mike Hammer flaunts his vigilanteism in the face of New York officials hampered by court orders and the rights of the suspect. For the first time since Kafka, the police are in and of themselves antagonists. While the Continental Op works with them on a more or less equal basis as representative of a nationwide agency—the thuggish cops in *Red Harvest* are little more than henchmen—loner Sam Spade has to suffer the corrupt Lieutenant Dundy's suspicions regarding his role in his partner's murder, and Marlowe's worst fears are personified not in the many gangsters and killers with whom he comes into contact, but in a public servant whose salary he pays through taxes. In *The Long Goodbye* he observes:

The homicide skipper that year was a Captain Gregorius, a type of copper that is getting rarer but by no means extinct, the kind that solves crimes with the bright light, the soft sap, the kick to the kidneys, the knee to the groin, the fist to the solar plexus, the night stick to the base of the spine. Six months later he was indicted for perjury before a grand jury, booted

without trial, and later stamped to death by a big stallion on his ranch in Wyoming.

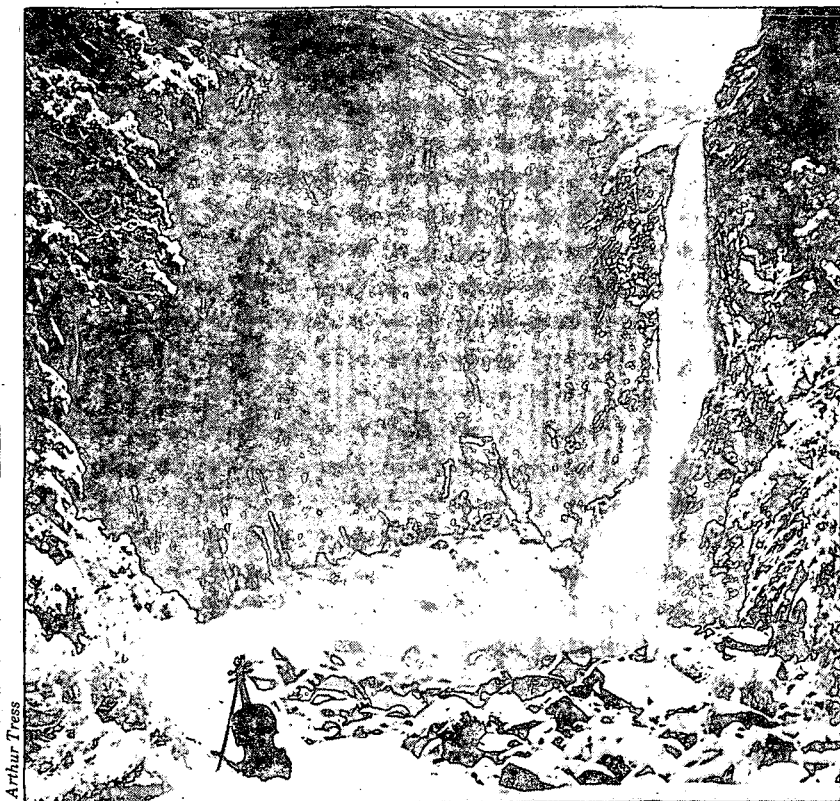
Right now I was his raw meat. . . .

The last statement is as chilling as any in the Marlovian saga. He has never been in greater danger, not even when standing on the wrong side of a murderer's gun.

These stories are endlessly circling, rephrasing themselves in new language and different voices, but the messages remain unchanged. They are cries of terror, and they are all the more unsettling because they are in cold print. That "smell of fear" Chandler valued is more than important to the genre; it is the genre. It alone ties together the many styles and world views gathered under the catch-all heading "hardboiled," and it is the quality the writers seek through the deliberately repetitive use of the devices examined here. In so doing, like Edgar Allan Poe and the phobia of premature burial, they reveal many of their own demons in the process, for they are dangling the bait that caught them.

Chandler, who was well aware of this, tipped his hand in *The Long Goodbye* when he had Marlowe say: "There is no trap so deadly as the trap you set for yourself."

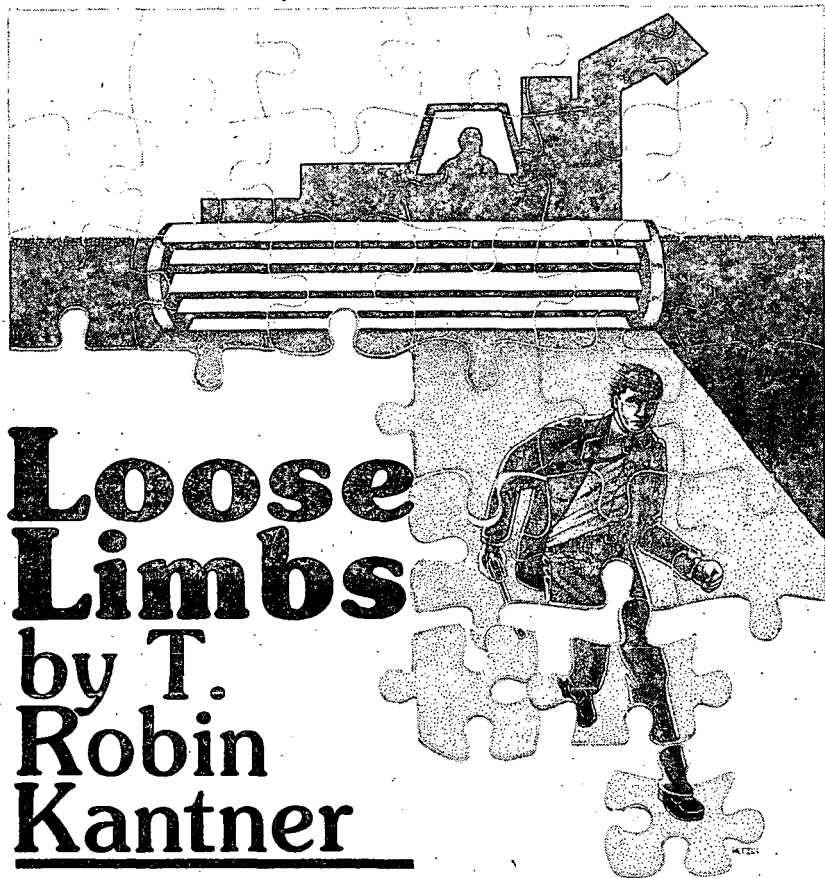
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

Why? And how? And then there's the problem of the missing violinist . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.



Loose Limbs

by T. Robin Kantner

The old lady from Bad Axe found the severed hand with the ring on it in her glove compartment while searching for her title and registration.

She stared at it a long moment without changing expression, then turned to the officer

Illustration by Steve Hetzel

and mused, "Now how do you suppose *that* got in there?"

"Bad Axe," Dennehy mumbled, squinting at the Michigan map, pin poised.

"The Thumb, boss," Mooney said helpfully.

"Right." Dennehy poked the

pin into the map and turned back to the long legal summary sheet that sat on a messy pile of files. "Next. One severed ear. Found on the bank of the Huron River in the Lower Huron Metropark, New Boston."

Mooney made a strangled noise. Dennehy glanced at him, pawed for a pin, stuck it in the swatch of map green that denoted the Metropark, and flipped to the next file. "Three days later, a severed foot. Found in the bottom of a freshly dug grave in the Hillandale Cemetery, Salem Township, Wash-tenaw County."

He had the pin ready to stab when Mooney gave a weird, grating, gasping sound. "Okay, Jerry, what is it?"

Mooney coughed out a puff of cigar smoke and chortled, "Foot in the grave!"

Dennehy scowled. "Jerry—"

"I can't help it!" Mooney gasped, eyes wet, burly body sprawled everywhere in his chair, huge cigar describing circles of smoke in the air. "The ear—the ear! Ear to the ground!"

"Some people can find humor in anything," Dennehy said grimly, stabbing the pin into the map.

"And that old lady!" Mooney shrieked. "Hand in glove!"

"Write your 'Saturday Night Live' routines on your own time. Meanwhile, let's do police work." Dennehy shook his head and

consulted his file. "Two days later, the head. Found buried on the beach of Silver Lake, Livingston County." Not a sound from Mooney. Dennehy marked the spot, then ventured a glance at his partner, whose face was somber.

"Head in the sand," Mooney said grimly.

Dennehy nodded, Jack Webb style. "Right." Consulted the file. "One finger, apparently the second one from the right hand. A laid-off Buick line worker found it in his mailbox in Flint."

As Dennehy pinned the map, Mooney said innocently, "Ain't it awful how the unemployed get the finger, boss?"

"Then," Dennehy said loudly, "thank God, the rest of him. Buried in a pile of dirt at a construction site along I-75 in Madison Heights." He froze, closed his eyes, shook his head, and said, "Uh-one, and uh-two, and—"

"UP TO HIS NECK!" both policemen shouted, collapsing.

The office door hurled open, the draft from the hallway churning the stale clouds of Mooney's cigar smoke. Sarah, their petite, well-dressed, blonde part-time secretary, said, "The hell is this?"

"Hey!" Mooney snapped. "We're brainstorming a critical investigation here, you mind?"

She rolled her eyes and looked

at Dennehy. "Inspector, it's the commissioner on line two." She made her escape, pulling the door shut behind her, profoundly worried. Mooney's insanity was legendary, but Inspector Dennehy, the dour, sarcastic senior man, usually stayed steady. Maybe the loonies are taking over the asylum, she thought.

Dennehy grabbed the phone, lighted one of his continuous Camel straight-ends, and said, "Commissioner."

"Dick," came the smooth voice, "I want you to know that the governor and I have every confidence that the Office of Special Investigations will get the job done for us."

"Meaning," Dennehy grunted, "we'd better, et cetera."

"Richard," the voice went lower, "I don't have to remind you about the press conference yesterday. We're all on the spot over here."

"I lay awake all night thinking about it, commissioner."

"You men are the elite, inspector. The front line. The can-do boys. Don't let us down." He hung up.

Dennehy dropped his receiver in the general direction of the phone, took a deep drag on his cigarette, and let his glance wander over the pin-pocked Michigan map. "So, pard, what have we got here?"

Mooney, a man too big to be

comfortable in any chair, slouched and stretched and re-lighted his horseleg cigar, puffing blue. "A stinker, or why else would *we* get it? Pieces of body scattered all over the landscape. Cops stumbling all over each other, getting nowhere. Newspapers and TV stations having a first class media event—the 'treasure hunt,' they're calling it. And our governor getting himself on TV to announce that he's giving total jurisdiction of the case to the good old Office of Special by-God Investigations, Michigan State Police. You and me, babe." His voice lowered and mellowed into a passable imitation of Casey Kasem, which also sounded uncannily like the commissioner. "The elite. The front line. The can-do boys."

"What about the victim?" Dennehy pawed through the mess on his desk until he found the unopened plain white envelope. He ripped it open and a large gold ring tumbled out onto the desk. He picked it up and let it roll around in his hand, staring at it intently, his mouth going dry.

"White male caucasian, late forties. No identifying marks or I.D. Killed by massive and virtually simultaneous blows with several very heavy, sharp instruments. He was cut to pieces all at once."

"Anything else?" Dennehy

asked quietly.

"Yeah!" Mooney retorted. "We don't know who he is."

"I do," Dick Dennehy said.

Mooney stared at his boss as if he'd sprouted an extra head.

"Mike McDuffie," Dennehy said lightly, "once known as Mike McDee."

"C'mon, Sherlock," Mooney sneered; "we haven't even got the print check back from D.C. yet."

Dennehy squinted, inhaling on the bitter cigarette, eyes on the ring in the palm of his hand. "Look at this. Two small stones, scroll work, and a date engraved real small in the center. Custom made. I should know, I had it done for him and I handed it to him at his wedding. Fort Gordon, Georgia, September, 1964."

Mooney leaned forward, staring at the ring. "Could be a coincidence," he said uneasily.

"Nah." Dennehy set the ring carefully down on the one square inch of uncluttered desk, fished out a new cigarette, and lighted it from the quarter-inch butt of the old one. "He was from Michigan. K'zoo, I think, someplace like that. Met him at Michigan State." Dennehy recited his past in his normal police monotone. "He and I dormed together. Helled around together for four years. Double-dated, him and Amy Clarkson, me and An-

gela." His voice did not change at the mention of his ex-wife.

"Joined the army after we graduated, got in the same Ranger unit, trained at Fort Gordon. He got married there, some chick named Peggy, I hardly knew her. Then we did the 'Nam together. When we rotated back, he headed back to Georgia and I came here. That's the last I saw of him."

"How come," Mooney asked, "being dorm rats and war buddies and all?"

Dennehy tilted his head back, eyes finding the map. "Oh well. Lives move away from each other. It was a long, long summer camp friendship. We both had other things to do. And he was a son of a bitch in a lot of ways."

"Guess he had it coming then, huh?" Mooney suggested, testing him.

Dennehy didn't answer. After a long moment, he said, "So how do we do this, Jerry?"

"You asking me?"

"You heard me."

Mooney's round face went vacant around the cigar, then he said, "Wait for the print check and confirm the I.D. Interview the other investigating officers. Maybe canvass the neighborhoods where the body was found. You know, the kind of thorough, professional police work that you're renowned for." He emphasized the pronoun.

Dennehy grinned without humor. "That's not what *you'd* do. That's what *I'd* do."

Mooney didn't like where this was heading. "Yeah, so do it!"

"Forget the wife," Dennehy said firmly. "That was twenty years ago, long cold trail. And whatever we say in the State Police about the capabilities of the local constables, from the looks of those reports they did a pretty thorough job of canvassing. No sense tilling soft soil. And we don't have all kinds of time on this thing."

Mooney eyed his partner, big round face vacant of expression, as Dennehy finished his cigarette and chain-lit another one. Holding the new one between thumb and forefinger, he waved it toward the map. "See up there?"

Mooney swaggered over next to where Dennehy slouched and stared at the map, hands on hips, cigar hanging from his face. "Yeah, so?"

"See the pins? The places where the pieces of body were found kind of make a circle, don't they?"

"What is this, a Rorschach test? Or do I mean Wassermann?"

Dennehy rose, nudged his burlier partner out of the way and, squinting at the map, began walking his thumb and finger around the affected area like a compass. "What's the one

place all these sites are equidistant from, Jerry?"

"Don't know. Guess it's kind of like finding the exact population center of the United States."

Dennehy brought his hand back, still staring at the map. "Not exactly the same distance," he muttered. "What about the roads? We got M-32 here, your east-west, and then either M-5 or U. S. 22—"

"Hm. Driving time rather than distance?"

"Combination, maybe." Dennehy leaned forward, so close to the map that the cigarette in his lips threatened to ignite it. "What's this little pinhead place here?"

Mooney, whose eyesight was better, said, "Hoskins. Hoskins, Michigan. Your typical Michigan wide spot in the road. Population maybe two hundred and fifty if you include the cows."

Dennehy was thinking hard but went into the jibe as if it had been scripted. "Your big city shtick doesn't impress me. I happen to know you're from Ontanagon or someplace like that. Michigan man, my ass."

"It's on the Upper Peninsula!" Mooney said as indignantly as if they hadn't run through the routine a thousand times.

"Case closed. You're lucky they gave you U. S. citizenship." Dennehy withdrew the

cigarette from his mouth and hung both fists on his hips. "See there, Jerry? U. S. 22 runs right through Hoskins. Good north-south shot. M-32 intersects 22 five, six miles south of Hoskins. Now, we got to figure the body was all in one place at one time, don't we?"

"That's what I like about you, boss, you never make wild-eyed assumptions about anything."

"Yeah. Well, first it's in one piece and then it's in a bunch of pieces and the killer wants to scatter them all over the place for some reason. The Hoskins area is the one place with relatively quick and equal access to all those spots where the pieces were found. I'd make book the murder took place around there somewhere."

Mooney watched apprehensively as his partner went over to the corner of the tiny office and unslung his shoulder harness from a hook on the wall. "You ever heard the expression, 'May you inherit a thousand acres, and be found dead on every one of them?'"

Dennehy made his flat smile, stretched the harness straps, and slid expertly into it, feeling the hard, heavy shape of the Colt .44 Python with its six-inch barrel. "No. I'm Irish, not Sicilian."

Mooney said deliberately, "This divorce business has messed up your judgment.

You're just spoiling for a fight, any fight. You're rushing into this thing half-cocked."

Dennehy reached for his cheap gray suit jacket and said, as if he hadn't heard Mooney's comment, "I'm going to run down there and look around."

"Look, boss," Mooney said angrily, "For once do what you always tell me to do. Do the paperwork end instead of going off like a bull in a china shop. You're busting up the act. I'm supposed to be the wild-eyed man of action and you're supposed to be the calm, cool, thorough investigator, remember?"

"Think I can't handle it, Jerry?" Dennehy asked, slipping into his jacket.

"You got the messiest kind of personal problems. Your eyesight's not so good. You haven't been on the range in months. The most exercise you get is bending your elbow. Need I say more?"

"Later, buddy." Dennehy reached for the doorknob.

Mooney stood and shouted, "Gosh, I never knew you loved field work so much. It's a good thing McDuffie wasn't a real pal of yours, or you'd be taking this real personal or something."

Thinking about the 'Nam, Dennehy swung the door open and said, "What makes you think I'm not?" as he headed out.

Even when confronted with Dennehy's police I.D., the apartment building manager wasn't eager to let him into his ex-wife's Pontiac apartment. It was hard case versus harder case and, as usually happens, the harder case won:

Dennehy strode inside, slammed the door behind him, and glanced impatiently around the plant-bedecked, luxuriously furnished two bedroom place, listening to the little manager's angry footsteps click away down the hallway outside. Dennehy knew what would happen. The manager would inform Angela of his intrusion. Angela would inform her lawyer. Her lawyer would send Dennehy a nasty letter. And Dennehy would, most likely, call the little owl-faced parasite and tell him not to interfere with police business. And then...

No sign of the guy, whatever his name was. Angela's true love. The man she'd waited patiently for all those years. And blah, and blah, and blah. Dennehy was half disappointed. Meeting him would have been fun. For Dennehy, anyway.

But he'd worry about all that later. Today he needed McDuffie's picture. And he found it in an old box of army junk that Angela had generously agreed to keep for Dennehy

since there wasn't space for it in the crummy temporary room he rented in Lansing after Angela threw him out.

Dennehy stuffed the picture into his jacket pocket and stormed out of the apartment without looking back.

Hoskins could have been any one of ten thousand places in the Midwest. Flat land; big farm buildings in the distance, a couple of grain elevators, fields of contented cows, the stench of manure, long stretches of sugar beets and wheat and towering late-season corn. Then the village itself: small neat houses, a couple of wide streets, one traffic signal, one gas station, one farm bureau, one car wash (CLOSED SUNDAY. CONSIDER YE FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD), one post office, one grocery store, one saloon, and four churches.

Matter of fact, Dennehy thought as he rolled into the village in his unmarked state-owned Plymouth Fury, the only evidence that this was Hoskins was the twisted, pellet-riddled sign at the outskirts that said: HOSKINS. ELEV. 669. And added mysteriously, HOME OF CANTON CREGAR.

Dennehy angle-parked about halfway down the main street. The town was sleepy, the few people around hardly gave him a second look. Picture in hand

and story in mind, he began his trek.

Two hours later, as the sun headed for the horizon, Dennehy had left three miles of shoeleather on Hoskins' cracked sidewalks and gotten nowhere. Zip on Mike McDuffie. Only one place left to check, reserved, intentionally, for last: Hoskins' only drinking establishment, Bill Dukenfield's.

The place was heavy in formica, creaking wood floors and the smell of booze, and light of people except for a couple of truckers and the tall, hefty, bluejeaned female bartender who half-leaned, arms crossed, on the shelf behind the bar, eyes on the big color TV which murmured soap from its mounting in the corner.

Her name tag said KAREN. Dennehy slid wearily onto a stool and ordered a Stroh's, which Karen pulled expertly and set on a cheap cocktail napkin on the bar before him. Dennehy hefted the brimming mug in her direction and said, "Drown in a vat of alcohol; O Death, where is Thy sting?"

She gave him a dark look that said, you get all kinds in here. "How's that, sir?"

Dennehy took a belt and said, "To W. C. Fields, born William Claude 'Bill' Dukenfield. Whoever named this bar had a great sense of humor."

Karen didn't change expres-

sion. "Why don't you try that bit on Dukenfield when he comes in a little later? See if you can get a laugh out of *him*. Nobody else has been able to." She returned her attention to the tube.

"But seriously, folks," Dennehy said, "who the hell is Canton Cregar, anyway?"

She looked at him, a slight touch of irony crossing her face. "You really *are* from out in the woods, aren't you? He was our big high school football hero back in the sixties. Then tight end for the Cleveland Browns."

Dennehy drank some more, eyeing her. "Huh. I thought I was up on all the big players."

She grinned mischievously. "Unless you're up on the big players of the Toledo insurance business, I doubt you'd ever have heard of him."

"I get it. Injured, huh?"

"Second pro game."

"Hm." Dennehy drank some more beer and thought about the picture in his pocket. What the hell, I've asked everybody else but the cows. He got the picture out. "You got a good memory for faces, Karen?"

She leaned forward, the ironical look still firmly in place. "Yeah, as a matter of fact. Know what your face tells me? Cop."

"Skip tracer out of Lansing. Dennehy. Ever seen this guy?"

She looked at the picture, at the policeman, and back at the picture. "This an old picture?"

"Mid-sixties or so."

"What'd he do?"

"Stuck a bank for couple thousand."

She pursed her lips, studying the picture. "Mike somebody. Never caught the last name. He came in here Friday nights pretty regular. Haven't seen him around in a while."

Dennehy scooped up the picture and put it in his pocket. He felt that curious quickening in him that only the real pros feel, when a hunch pays off, when a lead opens up like a widening canyon. Nice to know it can still happen, he thought sourly. "Any idea where he lives?"

Karen drew him a fresh beer without asking, and slid a tin ashtray down in front of him as he lighted a Camel. "No idea at all. Like I said, he hasn't been around lately."

"When he was here, then."

"Hey, mister, he just did his drinking here, that's all. Best I can tell you, he usually came in with some of the people from the Poe place. They're always in here Friday nights."

"What's that?"

"Big farm southeast of town. Whole bunch of young aggies came in with Miz Poe after Jimmy Poe died."

Dennehy acted out a perfectly weary, resigned shrug. "Guess I got to check it out. How do I get there?"

It wasn't hard.

A sign on the mailbox said POE; another, mounted on the high barbed-wire fence, said WE USE O-Y-O SEEDS, and another warned against hunting or trespassing.

Dennehy pulled into the gravel lane and drove slowly up it toward the farm buildings. Husky green corn rose seven feet or more on both sides, cutting off vision as if he was driving through a tunnel. At the end of the lane was a gravel courtyard that fronted on a modern ranch house, an old barn, and a couple of other buildings. He parked next to an old, well-maintained Chevy pickup with a camper cap over the bed; and alpine-green Audi 5000, a Harley-Davidson Super Glide, and a gold Toyota Corona.

The policeman got out of his car and looked over the vehicles, thinking, these sure aren't your pore old broke farmers, that's for sure.

In the stifling August farmyard silence, Dennehy picked up other interesting things. The impeccable maintenance of the buildings and grounds; the strong, high steel fences surrounding the fields—but since there were no animals to pen in, the fences had to be to keep out animals of the human variety. A steel gate stood open by

the lane, but could obviously be swung shut to turn the farm into a fortress.

At the far end of the farmyard, an old barn, probably an original, had been re-sided and was very obviously still in use. Next to it stood an old white cement silo, and as Dennehy's car's engine did the cooling tick, a husky young man emerged from behind the silo, walking around a house-high pile of brush and limbs next to it, a Remington pump shotgun slung casually under his arm.

He approached Dennehy and called in a polite voice, "Would you mind staying right where you are, sir?"

The man had shoulder-length brown hair tied back in a tight pony tail, a close-cropped full beard, and wore sturdy denim clothes over stout knee-high boots. Dennehy grinned, "You're the boss."

As the man stopped, shotgun still pointed carefully down but a couple of points away from Dennehy, the house door slammed to the right. Dennehy saw a short young woman approach him. Her cap of brown hair was permed in a float around her face; she was stylishly dressed in a white one-piece outfit that came just down to her knees. She looked like a prosperous young lawyer or doctor and not a day over thirty.

When she reached the policeman, she said, "Good afternoon. Can we help you with something?"

"You Mrs. Poe?" Dennehy asked. He noticed that the man stayed some distance back and off to the side, providing a clear field of fire. No getting the drop on this one.

She nodded, smiling. "Yes. You're—?"

"Dennehy, out of Lansing. Working a skip-trace deal for one of the banks up there. Somebody in town I.D'd my subject and thought he might have spent some time here."

"You have some kind of identification, Mr. Dennehy?" she asked. Overly courteous, almost to the point of sarcasm.

"Sure." Damn good thing he did, too. He very slowly went into his lower coat pocket, got out a well-worn business card, and handed it to her. He noticed her hand as she took it. It was well-tended, but had lines and wear and veins that belied the youthfulness of the rest of her. He added a few years to his previous estimate.

She handed the card back. Her face was cold and unimpressed, the lord of the manor annoyed by a trifle. "Who's the man?"

"Named McDuffie, Mike McDuffie. I have a picture." There was no reaction from the

pair, no sound save birds and a tractor roaring in the distance. Dennehy looked at the shotgun toter and asked with exaggerated courtesy, "Mind if I go into my inner coat pocket?"

The man nodded slowly, once. Dennehy got out the picture and handed it to the woman. She scanned it, lips pursed, and handed it back. She said off-hand, "Yes, he was here. Migrant help. He was with us for a couple of months, then he left."

"When?" Dennehy asked, eyes locked on hers.

She propped a fist under her chin, elbow cupped in her other palm, and shrugged slightly. "Couple months ago. We have a pretty high turnover here, in the basic labor module. It doesn't matter to us. They come and they go."

"Any idea where he went?" Dennehy asked evenly.

"No. Sorry." She dropped her hands in dismissal.

Dennehy sighed theatrically. "Well, dead end, I guess." He returned the picture to his pocket. "Thanks. Oh, by the way."

"Yes?" Poe asked impatiently.

Dennehy gestured around, allowing the front of his coat to fall open, giving free access to the Colt if he needed it. "All this. The electrified fences and

gates and the goon with the gun. What gives, anyhow?"

Poe drew herself perfectly straight, accenting the fine lines of her body beneath the exquisitely tailored white dress. "We're a progressive agricultural co-operative. Highly mechanized and experimental. The farm is a business and, as a business, we have secrets to protect. Security is important."

"I understand," Dennehy lied perfectly. "Thanks for your time." Conscious of the shotgun, he walked slowly back to the Fury, the perfect imitation of an out-of-shape gumshoe, a working stiff, a harmless shamus with nothing like a Colt .44 Python under his arm. Wheezing, he got into the Fury, fired it up, and rolled back down the lane past the high electrified fence.

Only when he was on the thin blacktop road did he allow himself a full, relieved, deep breath of air.

The cool deskbound professional in him wanted to find a pay phone and raise Lansing and call out the cavalry.

The ex-lieutenant of Rangers with two Silver Stars and a Purple Heart, the admirer of Jerry Mooney, the old friend of Mike McDuffie, remembered that this was Friday: traditional beer night for the Poe people at Bill Dukenfield's.

There were only three of them, riding in the front seat of the Chevy pickup: the Poe woman, the shotgun toter, and another guy.

In the small town darkness across the street, Dennehy waited till Dukenfield's parking lot was empty of people, then strolled purposefully across the street and through the packed lot toward the far end, where the Chevy pickup sat empty.

He could hear rockabilly pounding through the cement walls of the bar as he reached the pickup. The back hatch on the truck's camper cap was locked. Dennehy went into his pants pocket and came out with a short, tempered-steel center-punch—for which Dennehy had many uses, mostly illegal—shoved the pointed end into the lock, whacked the flat end with his fist, and bent it sharply. The lock gave with a snap. Dennehy opened the hatch, climbed inside clumsily, and pulled the hatch shut.

Thanks to the deeply tinted glass of the cap windows, it was nearly pitch black inside. Dennehy lay on the carpeted pickup bed and squirmed forward to the wall of the cab and lay crossways. There was a rear window in the cab wall, but Dennehy lay so close beneath it that anyone looking back

from the cab wouldn't see him.

He hoped. And worried about it, while he waited. And waited. And waited.

The luminous dial of his digital watch said 3:30 A.M. when the Poe people returned to the truck. He heard the cab doors open, felt the vehicle shake under new weight, heard muffled voices—laughing, mostly—and then the engine roared. The policeman crunched himself as close to the cab wall as he could as the truck rolled out. Unintelligible voices floated back as the truck swayed, turned, picked up speed, slowed down.

At the end there was a series of starts and stops. Opening the gate and closing it, Dennehy figured. Then the engine noise echoed; they were inside a building. Dennehy pulled his bent, aching frame even smaller as interior building lights went on briefly. The young farmers slammed out of the truck, chatting as they walked away, voices getting dimmer and then disappearing. The building lights went off; a big steel door slammed shut somewhere outside, like in a prison cell block, leaving Dennehy alone in the silence.

He gave it a full half hour, to give the beered-up and worn-out young folks a chance to crash. Then he slid to the end of the cab, flipped open the

hatch as quietly as he could, and climbed out clumsily. He ached all over from the cramped position, his tendons feeling like bent hangers that could never straighten again completely, and looked around in the reflected glow of the outside security lights that shone in through a couple of high, steel-framed windows in the wall. He was in the barn.

This was nothing like the barns he'd seen in storybooks. It had been completely reconditioned inside: cement floor, reinforced, insulated walls, fluorescent light fixtures. The gold Corona sat next to the Chevy pickup. As Dennehy slowly walked toward the back of the place, he figured it was used mainly as a garage. Tools hung on the walls, as well as cans of motor oil, fan belts, hoses. Totally uninteresting.

At the back, he found a big wood sliding door. Dennehy carefully slid it open. Here the twentieth century ended. Rickety steps led down to a dirt floor, and the barn's original rough wood walls showed, reaching up three stories to the old haymow. A profusion of old rusted equipment stood around: a manure spreader, a couple of disk harrows, and other lethal looking devices that Dennehy could not identify. And, in the corner, a huge vertical machine sat mounted on an A-frame

trailer, its tires nearly flat from disuse, rising up ten feet, with a kind of hopper at the top and a corrugated steel chute leading up and away from the bottom. A faded, elaborate legend was inscribed on the boilerlike base of the machine: SIMPSON STRAW CHOPPER. FROM NEW IDEA.

Dennehy stepped down to the dirt floor and walked carefully over in the dim light, figuring out how it worked. Stuff went in the hopper at the top, was apparently ground up by blades in the boiler section, then blown out the chute somewhere. Still looked to be in working order, Dennehy thought, examining the motor.

The blinding lights went on.

Dennehy rose, turning, his right hand moving under his coat. A voice—sharp, female, commanding—said, "That's it, Dick."

Mrs. Poe stood at the door from the garage, a Savage twin-barrelled 16-gauge shotgun leveled at him. She wore a blue chambray shirt, denim pants, and hiking boots. Her hair, thanks to her perm, looked as good as it ever did. Despite the lateness of the hour and the evening's partying, the woman's eyes were narrow and totally alert. That's great, just my luck, Dennehy thought sourly: a chick who can hold her booze.

Poe's stern expression broke into a playful grin. "What'd you

do, Dick, hide in the back of the truck?"

"How'd you know I was here?" he asked flatly.

Poe cocked her head upward to her right. A black steel box with a short antenna and a metal dish was mounted there. She said proudly, "Motion and sound detectors. All our buildings are equipped with them."

"Cute." His first sneaky-pete in years, only to be nailed by high tech. It was depressing.

Poe said smugly, "And don't think I bought into your skip-tracer story either, Dick. I know you too well for that. You're either a cop or a reasonable facsimile thereof."

Dennehy looked slowly from the twin ports of the shotgun and squinted at her. "You know me?"

Her smile went even bigger. "Amy Poe," she said, toying with him. "Amy Clarkson Poe. Your friend McDee's ex-bimbo back at Michigan State." She paused dramatically and then asked, as a mother to a child, "Remember me now?"

Dennehy's mind flicked back in time like a slide projector in rapid reverse. Amy Clarkson? The fat young acned snaggle-toothed whiny-voiced suffering loser? He said, inadequately, "You're kidding."

She grinned and shook her

head, standing tall, proud, and slim at the top of the steep wood steps, her hands expertly keeping the shotgun trained on him. "A reconditioned version. Diets and skin treatments and new capped teeth and a nose job and exercise and physical therapy. I'm not surprised you didn't recognize me. McDuffie didn't either."

The policeman did not answer.

The woman's glance shifted to the machine behind Dennehy and then back to him. "Interesting little piece of gear there, isn't it?"

He didn't move. The Colt itched under his arm but he didn't move. She had the high ground and the firepower. No way, no way at all.

She said, "It wasn't too tough. McDuffie did most of the work himself. He was quite taken with the young Miz Poe, you know. He'd do anything—she asked, including climbing up to the mouth of the hopper there. When he had his back to me I whacked him on the head with a piece of two-by-four and let him fall down inside. The blades in there are sharp, real sharp; we keep all our equipment well maintained, even the old antiques.

"I started the motor, let it warm up for a minute so he could hear it, then kicked the clutch a couple of times. Just

enough to cycle the blades around. That's all it took."

Dennehy, dry-mouthed, was fired up with adrenalin, trying to think of a way out, trying not to think of his old friend hacked to pieces while Amy Clarkson smiled, kicking the clutch. "How'd you explain it to the other people here?"

"They understand our security needs," she said sharply. "We have confidential things going on here, we don't like strangers around, especially cops. I told them he was an undercover cop and they bought it. In fact, they got quite inventive with ideas about scattering the pieces around to confuse the cops. Until you came along the project went well. After all these years, I finally got to take care of him just like I'd dreamed."

Keep her talking, keep her talking. "Just out of curiosity, what the hell did he do? I know he wasn't the greatest guy in the world—"

She squinted incredulously. "You're *kidding*. You mean, you had no idea about him and Angela."

He said nothing, just stared.

"Yeah," she said. "Just before you guys left for the army. I caught them. Well, they didn't really try to hide it, at least not from me; I was the resident victim in those days. What was McDee's nickname for me? The Maggot?" She laughed huskily.

"Guess you never knew about Angela's, uh, appetites."

Dennehy actually sighed, shaking his head.

She cocked her head. "Don't tell me you *married* the bitch?"

He wanted to laugh but it would have come out wrong. "For a while."

Her face went vacant, her eyes distant. "Poor old Dick." Her hands tightened on the shotgun. "Poor old Dick. Too bad you're a cop."

She kept her eyes on him as she lowered her foot to the top step. Apparently the long evening of drinking, and the lack of sleep, had told some on her after all, because she slipped and went sideways, arms diving out for the wall. Even so, as Dennehy made his break, he saw that her coordination was pretty good; she landed on her feet and didn't lose the shotgun. He ran hell for leather toward the far end of the barn and another big wood sliding door, running stooped over, hunched and weaving, using the equipment standing around as cover from the shotgun blast which he could almost feel headed his way.

He yanked the door open, jumped through, and pulled it shut just as the shotgun went off, just a microsecond too late. In the new darkness, he found a stout steel hasp on the door and rammed it home, barring

the way. Now for a way out. He turned, feeling the Colt Python in his grip.

In the dim light he saw he was in an old, completely dis-used portion of the barn, the place where the cows had been milked many years ago. Stalls ran the length of the narrow building, filled with old rusted coils of fencing material, posts, and other junk. Dust and the stink of ancient manure hung in the air. The big wide doors to the right were boarded shut. He broke into a run along the narrow wood alley where the feed for the cows had been placed during milking, hoping there was some kind of exit at the end; it was the only choice he had left.

The alley ended with a series of steel doors running upward toward the sky in a long, narrow vertical tube. He was at the silo, reached through those steel doors whose handles provided a ladder that led to the top. No choice at all. Dennehy holstered the Python and began climbing, his hands sweaty on the rust of the ladder, the clomping of his shoes echoing in the narrow, concrete, man-sized ladderway.

It seemed like the damn silo was three miles high. He went so fast he nearly shot out the top. He froze, then carefully raised his head and peered out. A door banged open somewhere

far below; Poe must have figured it out and was on her way. Dennehy looked down. The silo was better than thirty feet high, straight down to hard gravel ground. Except, about thirty degrees around the rim, he could see the pile of brush and limbs. Not a big pile, but maybe enough. If that's all it was. If there weren't rocks under there, or steel stakes, or something.

Dennehy shinnied himself up till his shoes were on the cement rim of the silo. It was only about four inches wide, which is plenty as long as you're not thirty feet up with people after you. He carefully wobbled to an erect position. In the purplish light of first dawn the cornfields yawned blackly toward the horizon, clumps of trees in the distance.

Dennehy started tottering around the rim of the silo. Five, six, seven, eight hesitant steps, and the brush pile was below him. He dared not look behind or down or anywhere, but he heard running footsteps and unintelligible shouts. Think about it and you'll chicken out, he told himself. So he didn't think; he jumped.

When he got there the pile gave nicely with a horrid crackling and snapping of limbs. Dennehy gasped and blurrily checked himself out and determined that none of the limbs was his. But jagged stumps,

dead thornbushes and other surprises had raked his legs and arms savagely like a million razor and floor burns. Dennehy bobbed, kicking and pulling for purchase, and dragged himself out the far side of the pile. He hurt like hell and, simultaneously, didn't notice it at all. Instead he set off on a lurching, lead-legged run toward the sanctuary of the cornfield, pounding drunkenly across freshly mown turf.

A gun roared some distance behind him. Dennehy instinctively ducked into a crouch and dived into the first ranks of seven-foot cornstalks and ran perpendicular to the rows, slamming stalks savagely away with his arms. Finally he used his head, did a sharp right, and ran parallel with the rows over the lumpy, moist clay for maybe ten yards, then ground to a halt.

He gasped and wheezed, chest heaving. He'd have given ten years of his life to metamorphose back to that lean young Ranger of Vietnam, circa 1965. He stared numbly at his feet, trying to keep his noise down. And saw something else growing between the rows of corn. The nice, neat straight line of a very different vegetable.

Dennehy shot his glance left and right. More of the same, stretching as far as he could see. Artfully concealed between

the rows of corn.

Experimental agriculture, huh?

Explained a lot, maybe, but Dennehy had no time to think about it. In the dead still silence he reached under his tattered coat and got out the heavy, slick Python again. Come on, babe. No electronic gizmos, no steel fences, no walls and doors now; just the jungle. My turf, not yours.

Her voice, light and condescending, cut through the corn. "It's no good, Dick."

He said nothing.

"This is a ten acre field, Dick. Electrically fenced on three sides and we're here covering the fourth. It's going to be a beautiful day, and we've got plenty of time to find you. So come out."

Yeah, sure, come on out and get killed. After a few minutes' silence, Dennehy heard the crackling of cornstalks from his right and his left. There were two of them, from the sound of it, stepping into the corn, trying to bracket him. He could keep going back away from them, but the field would end sooner or later. And he'd done enough running and hiding for one day. It was just like the 'Nam; you spent most of your time running and hiding, but pretty soon you had to start killing.

Dennehy, as silently as he

could, slid back two or three more rows, then turned and ran stealthily down the row to his left. This opponent would be looking to his left and right, hoping to catch the policeman in one of the rows. The last place he'd look—hopefully—would be in front of him.

Dennehy stopped just about where his sense of direction said the opponent was advancing. The cornstalks were packed so close together it was practically impossible to see past one row ahead. Yet, in the rising light of the new dawn, he could see the vague rustling of cornleaves two or three rows ahead of him.

He didn't hesitate. He leveled the Python carefully in front of him and squeezed off one shot.

A crash ahead and dead stillness. A shotgun blast off to the right, and the hot jagged load of buck tore through the corn in a whistling scream, uncomfortably close on Dennehy's right. Another blast, a little bit farther away. That opponent, thought Dennehy, had moved away from the victim, not toward him, and now had to reload. Perfect.

Dennehy charged forward. There on the ground, center-shot and extremely dead, was the longhaired shotgun toter, arms flung back, head propped forward against the base of three or four cornstalks, mouth

and eyes open. Dennehy swung to his right, raising the Python.

She was a fast reloader, Dennehy had to hand her that. Amy Clarkson Poe was in the same row, perhaps thirty feet away and just closing the breech of her shotgun when Dennehy appeared. The first rays of the new sun caught her light cap of hair as she raised the shotgun, butt propped against her hip, face unafraid and purposeful. Dennehy aimed low and fired.

The slug got her in the right leg and, ripped it back. Like a limp wet rag she went face down in the dirt, landing on her shotgun, and didn't move. Dennehy kept the Colt extended and trained on the back of her head as he walked warily down to her; then he kicked the shotgun away and stared at her.

A shrill whine in the distance intruded on his thoughts. He stood straight and listened. When he heard the steel security gate crash to the ground, he holstered the Python and pressed wearily through the rows of corn back toward the farm.

The place crawled with uniforms: sheriff's deputies, State Police, emergency medical teams. Mingled in with them were the business suits: reporters, medical examiner's men, State Police, and gawkers. And finally

there was Jerry Mooney, livid, red-faced and shouting, dragging Dennehy to his car.

"Just couldn't listen, couldya! Had to come running out here and damn near get your head blown off! You know, when we busted through that gate there were five guys with shotguns heading toward that field you were in."

Dennehy said wearily, "Back off me, Jerry."

Mooney threw open the passenger side door of his Fury and brutally shoved his partner inside. "We got a real can of worms on our hands this time. Wait till the Federals get here. McDuffie was one of theirs, you know. Undercover investigator. Wire came in from D.C. early this morning after they ran the prints."

"Well, we took care of it for them," Dennehy stretched wearily in the seat as Mooney levered himself clumsily behind the wheel. "Why are you so riled, Jerry?"

"Something give you that idea?" Mooney asked as he started the engine, teeth clenched.

"Just a wild guess. Is it because I fouled up your grand rescue mission?"

"Nah, hell no." He wheeled the car forward with a lurch, scattering the men standing around.

"Is it because I broke the case?"

Mooney goosed the car down the lane.

"Just doing your job."

"Well," Dennehy asked patiently, "is it because you had me pegged for a desk soldier?"

Mooney spun the steering wheel and the rear tires and slid the car with a screech onto the blacktop. "No!"

"Then what is it?"

"Because you came damn close to getting yourself killed," Mooney shouted, "and I don't happen to want you dead, that's why!"

Dennehy gave his partner a bloodshot glance. "Gosh, that's sweet, Jerry."

"Hey, nothing personal," Mooney growled. "The State of Michigan has a lot of money invested in an experienced officer like you. Case you haven't heard, there's a fiscal crisis going on. I'm just thinking in the taxpayers' interest."

"Make you a deal," Dennehy said after a long pause. "From now on, I'll handle the calm, cool, boring professional police work."

"Yeah?" Mooney prodded guardedly.

"And you can be the hero."

"Sold," Mooney grinned.

"Except sometimes," Dennehy grinned back, slouching down in his seat.

UNSOLVED

by
Jerome Meyer

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

Of eight suspects in a recent holdup, one and only one man is guilty. When the eight men were questioned they tried to mix up the police by admitting guilt and blaming the other fellow. Here are their statements. See if you can find the guilty man if we assume that exactly half of those men were telling the truth and the other half lied. After you have found out who the culprit is you can tell who told the truth and who lied. Here are the statements of the eight men:

Cummings said: "Babbo is a liar."
Dillon said: "It was Flam who did it."
Abrams said: "I am the guilty man."
Higgins said: "Nobody did it."
Edwards said: "Flam is innocent."
Gunther said: "I am innocent."
Babbo said: "Gunther is the guilty man."
Flam said: "Gunther is a liar."

See page 133 for the solution to the November puzzle.

"Who Is the Culprit?," taken from Puzzle Quiz & Stunt Fun by Jerome Meyer, © 1948, 1956, 1972 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

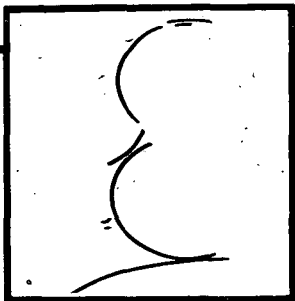


Nastassia Kinski in *The Moon in the Gutter*.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



David Goodis, whose 1953 novel *The Moon in the Gutter* has been made into the current French mystery movie of the same title, was a writer of brooding, atmospheric thrillers. Like his contemporary, Dashiell Hammett, he specialized in the tough city streets of San Francisco. And like his other contemporary, James M. Cain, his women were sensual, dangerous, and mysterious.

Goodis' *The Moon in the Gutter* took place among the tired, low-rise slum dwellings of Vernon Street in San Francisco. In the local seedy dive, the rotgut gin costs twenty cents for a double shot, and the prostitutes don't charge much more than that. The hero, William Kerrigan, is no private eye, but an ordinary longshoreman whose sister has committed suicide after having been raped. A year after her

death he is still brooding over it, and he has vowed to find and punish her attacker.

The characters and locales encountered in the course of Kerrigan's search will be familiar to readers of early mystery thrillers. There is a dissipated young playboy who first came slumming to Vernon Street's bar around the time of the rape-suicide. His very attractive blonde sister and Kerrigan instantly fall in love but are doomed to disappointment by the social gulf that lies between them. Then there is Mooney, a failed artist whose paintings were once praised by the critics and who keeps a portrait of the dead girl in his room. Finally there is Frank, Kerrigan's down-and-out younger brother, who appears to be capable of any enormity.

The story was obviously ideal for movie adaptation. The terse

prose, the clipped dialogue, the swiftly brutal action, and above all the characters' unsentimental views of themselves no matter how badly off they may be—all these make it come as no surprise that *The Moon in the Gutter* is the eighth movie to be made from books by Goodis. Of these, the first and possibly the best was the 1947 *Dark Passage*.

The Moon in the Gutter was filmed by French director Jean-Jacques Beineix, whose slick, pretentious thriller *Diva* was reviewed in this space last year. Beineix likes rich colors, especially red. He starts with the rape victim's blood in the gutter (a detail from the book). Subsequently his camera lingers over a red moon, a wallpaper design containing red birds, a billboard advertising a red liqueur, and the red convertible and red dress belonging to Nastassia Kinski, who plays the rich girl.

To make room for the empty minutes during which these and other static shots appear on the screen—usually with a thousand violins welling up in the background—the mystery plot has been cut down nearly to the point of incomprehensibility. It is true that Goodis, like Hammett and Cain, occasionally lapsed into set pieces of urban description rendered in purple prose. But he always

came back to the plot, as Beineix does not. Two of the suspects from the book never make an appearance in the movie. As for the bereaved brother, who is unaccountably given the name "Gerard" in the movie while the other characters retain their American names, he seems more interested in Nastassia Kinski and in getting drunk than in the mystery. Only from a reading of the book does one realize that his apparent lack of purpose, which makes the movie seem pointless, actually masks an unrelenting search for his sister's rapist.

The Moon in the Gutter does call attention to Goodis' novels. These are books in which there are no heroes, only victims. For in them the disillusionments of the Depression and the Second World War are conveyed more relentlessly than in any other mystery novels of the time. Zomba Books, a London publisher, has recently put out 4 *Novels* by David Goodis as a Black Box Thriller. *The Moon in the Gutter* is included, as is *Dark Passage*. The other two titles are *Nightfall*, which was made into a 1956 movie with Aldo Ray and Anne Bancroft, and *Down There*, made into one of the few successful French adaptations of an American thriller: Francois Truffaut's 1960 *Shoot the Piano Player*.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

by Peter Christian



Richard Franklin, director of the recent, not uninteresting *Psycho II*, is no stranger to the Hitchcockian mood the sequel tried closely to emulate. While a student at the University of California, the young Australian had successfully persuaded Alfred Hitchcock to take part in a film seminar, and they had become friends. Franklin was permitted to visit the set when the master was filming *Topaz*. Back in Australia, Franklin became a successful director of motion picture and television thrillers himself. When Universal chose him to direct the *Psycho* sequel, he was allowed to spend weeks studying the celebrated director's films in the vaults of the studio with which Hitchcock had been associated for decades. Recently, Richard Franklin spent an afternoon discussing with AHMM an aspect of that treasury few realize exists: Hitchcock's **trailers**.

Ordinarily, when a film has been shot, the director does not then turn his attention to creating the two-to-four-minute-long "coming attractions" piece which will precede his product into the movie theaters. It is put together by a different department of the studio, or by an outside promotion house. This was not, however, the case with Alfred Hitchcock. In order to preserve his films' surprise elements, Hitch always insisted on preparing the trailers for his creations himself, often shooting new scenes for them, and sometimes showing nothing at all from the actual film. As these trailers are never revived, and in more than one instance were not even preserved by the studio, they really can be classified—as Michael Goodwin observed two years ago, in an article he wrote for *New West* magazine—as "the lost films of Alfred Hitchcock." They cer-

tainly remain (when viewable) an interesting body of work.

Hitchcock paid attention to his trailer heralds from virtually his first American films, often experimenting with ways to catch the audience without giving away the plot. His trailer for *Suspicion* was a good case in point. Joan Fontaine, the frightened heroine who fears her charming, wastrel husband may be entertaining thoughts of killing her, makes a direct appeal to the viewer, specially shot: "There was something strange about Johnny Aysgarth. I knew it long before I married him..." We see clips from the film, with Aysgarth (Cary Grant) looking menacing, talking of killing. "My life was filled with terror..." Then, brilliantly, the audience is pulled right into her plight. "I wanted you to know... in case I met a violent end."

By the advent of his television series, Hitchcock was comfortable with pitching his upcoming movies on-camera personally. This he did first for *Psycho*, a thriller so bizarre no important scene could be pre-shown without lessening the film's total impact. So the director himself takes us on a tour of the empty rooms of the Bates motel and home. ("I think we can go inside, because the place is up for sale. Although I don't know who's going to buy it now.") During the tour, he hints at the terrible events that have taken place there. ("You should have seen the blood.") Only a few seconds of footage from the film—a quick, jolting lift from the shower scene—are shown. Similarly, for *The Birds*, Hitch spends five minutes in front of the camera discoursing on man's relation to the feathered kingdom—an essay first humorous, then gradually menacing—before we see a quick flash of wings attacking Tippi Hedren.

But perhaps the director's most unusual trailer was the one he constructed for *Rope*, which Richard Franklin unearthed recently from a dusty film vault. The motion picture (itself withdrawn from circulation for years, although happily in release once more) deals with two students who for kicks have just killed a friend and stuffed the body into a trunk in their apartment. Hitchcock tells the chilling story of their exposure in one continuous camera take, lasting the entire film, which is set entirely in the confines of some rooms overlooking New York's Central Park. The murder has happened before the film begins.

Obviously, scenes from this drama, especially with its highly experimental camera movement, could not easily be excerpted for a trailer. So Hitch shot a special *prelude* for his coming attraction, showing the two students in Central Park stalking their victim—taking his audience up to the moment of the murder—a sequence never seen in the movie itself. These are certainly lost Hitchcockian films, indeed!

The Terrible Three

by Thomasina Weber



It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and the temperature must be a hundred and fifty degrees, thought Jackie, sprawled in the shade of the oak tree in his yard. He felt twenty times older than his twelve years.

Tonight would be *it*, the big blowup. They had been planning it for weeks, because they were bored with pilfering stuff from convenience stores and gas stations. And now Slim, the leader of The Terrible Three, had chosen tonight, even though he knew Jackie could not be there.

"Googie can take your place," Slim had said. "He's tired of being number three man, anyway."

"Googie! But he's dumb!"

"He's smart enough not to have to babysit his bratty brother."

Googie's father owned a grocery store and Googie could get all the free cakes and popsicles he wanted. That was the real reason

Slim had picked tonight. He wanted Googie to be second man and, according to the club rules, you could move up only if the man above you failed to show.

Since Jackie could not face the humiliation of being bumped back to third man, there were only two choices left to him. He could quit The Terrible Three—in which case Slim would spread it all over the neighborhood how Jackie was a mama's boy and Jackie might as well drop dead—or he could show up for the job tonight.

Slim said it was set for ten o'clock. If Bunny would go to bed like other kids, Jackie could sneak out after he was asleep. But every night Bunny would watch TV and scream if anyone tried to put him to bed, and when Mom finally did get him upstairs, he would stay up half the night reading some dumb book from the library.

"Jackie! Come on in and eat."

He shuffled toward the house, wishing Mom would make a real meal once in a while the way Slim's mother did. Slim was always bragging about the roasts they had and the baked chickens and the casseroles, whatever they were. Jackie sometimes wondered if he was making it all up, for everyone in Slim's family was skinny.

"Fix yourself a sandwich," said Mom as Jackie sat down at the table. Bunny was already there, his bright blue eyes seeming even brighter because of his white skin and nearly white hair. "There's peanut butter in the cupboard."

"You can't have any jelly," said Bunny.

"Why not, Bratso?"

"Don't call your brother Bratso."

"Because I finished it."

"Finished what, Bratso?"

"The stupid jelly."

Jackie looked at his brother's sandwich. "You didn't have to put it on an inch thick."

"Okay you kids, shut up. You want your father to come home and hear you fighting?"

"Who cares?" said Bunny.

Mom turned back to the sink and slapped a fat hand down on the countertop. "I should have stayed single," she said.

"Mom, do I *have* to sit with Bunny tonight?"

"You bet your sweet life you do! If I don't get out of this house, I'll blow a fuse."

Jackie finished his sandwich in silence, ignoring Bunny's kicks under the table. He looked instead at the wall clock. It said four thirty-five; that meant it was twenty to five. His mother was always

saying she was going to have the clock fixed. Just the way she was always going to go on a diet. Jackie swept his crumbs off the table and went to his room.

When his parents left that evening, Bunny was in the living room with the TV turned on full volume. Jackie considered locking his door and climbing out the window, but Bunny would come and pound on the door as he always did, and when nobody opened it, Bunny would know he was gone. When Bratso told Mom and Pop Jackie had sneaked out, they would ground him for a month.

But if Bunny *did* go to sleep—Mom kept her sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet. If she could take them, why not Bunny? Sleeping pills only put you to sleep, after all, and a little sleep never hurt anybody. By morning Bunny would be good as new and Jackie would still be the number-two man of The Terrible Three.

He did not have to tiptoe into the bathroom, for Bunny could not have heard a bulldozer behind him. Even so, Jackie was nervous and his fingers shook as he opened the bottle of pills and took one out. He put it in his shirt pocket and went back to the living room.

"Hey, Bratso, you want something to drink?" Bunny did not answer, so Jackie shook him roughly and repeated the question.

"Leave me alone!"

Jackie went to the kitchen. He put milk into a small pan and began to heat it. Then he added chocolate syrup and the sleeping pill. He was pouring it into a mug when Bunny spoke behind him.

"I want some."

"Okay," Jackie said, pretending annoyance, "I'll make some more for you."

"I want *that*."

"That's mine," said Jackie, taking a sip.

Bunny's hand flew up and knocked the mug across the kitchen, splattering its contents all over the floor and the cupboards. "Not any more, it isn't," said Bunny.

"Boy, wait till I tell Mom what you did!"

"I'll tell her you did it."

And he would, too, thought Jackie bitterly. "You better clean that mess up," he said, pouring more milk into the pan.

"I'm watching TV," said Bunny, marching back to the living room.

Jackie got another pill from the bathroom and made more chocolate milk. He carried it into the living room and, sitting down, took a very tiny sip.

"Where's mine?" asked Bunny.

"I didn't make you any."

"Why not?"

"Because there isn't any more milk." Jackie took another sip, hardly any at all.

A sly look came over Bunny's face. "Do you want me to splash it around again?"

"In the *living room*?"

"I will, if you don't give it to me."

With an exasperated sigh, Jackie handed the mug to his brother who took one taste and made a face. "You put something rotten in it! You're trying to make me sick!"

"Maybe the milk is sour," said Jackie managing to get hold of the mug. "I'll pour it down the sink."

"I'm going to tell Mama you tried to make me sick!"

Bunny flung himself down in front of the TV set and Jackie went back to the kitchen. It was nine thirty-five. He would have to arrive five minutes ahead of time in order to secure his place, and since it was a fifteen minute walk to the library, that meant he had only five minutes in which to figure what to do with Bunny.

He considered sneaking up on him and blindfolding him and tying him up in front of the TV set. He could be back from the job before his parents got home and he would release Bunny, telling him he himself had been tied up in the kitchen and had only now managed to get loose. It wouldn't work, of course. Bunny might believe him, but his parents wouldn't, and Bratso would be sure to tell them.

Suddenly an idea came to him. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He would take Bunny with him. It was nine forty. He would have to leave right now if he was to get to the library on time.

"Hey, Bunny!" He hurried to the living room. "Do you want to go out with me?"

"Where?" Bunny asked, without taking his eyes from the screen.

"Can't tell you. It's a secret mission."

"I'll bet!"

"No kidding, it really is. You could be the lookout."

"What will you be doing while I'm looking out?"

"Would you believe Slim and Googie and I are going to rob a bank?"

"No."

"That shows you're smart. You don't believe everything you hear."

"What *are* you going to do?"

"I told you, it's a secret."

"You have to tell me if I'm a part of the gang."

"Look, isn't it enough that I'm taking you along?"

"I have to know or I won't go, and when Mama and Papa come home, I'll tell them—"

"Okay, okay." If they ran all the way they could probably reach the library by five minutes to ten. "We're going to blow up the library," he said.

"With a *bomb*?"

"What else, dumb-dumb?"

"Where did you get a bomb?"

"Slim made it."

"Why do you want to blow up the library?"

"For kicks. To wake the town up. Besides, Slim got thrown out of there last month for spitting on the floor."

Bunny's eyes were wide. "You're *really* going to bomb the library?"

"Somebody is, but it won't be us if we don't get going."

"It won't be us," said Bunny.

Jackie stopped halfway to the door. "What do you mean, it won't be us?"

"We're not going."

"You said you wanted to go!"

Bunny was grinning. "You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

"You little rat!"

"You know I'm not allowed to go out after dark. Mama said—"

Jackie grabbed his arm. "You're going whether you like it or not." He twisted the arm until Bunny squealed.

"I'll go! I'll go!"

Jackie started to pull him toward the door. "We'll have to run all the way because of you!"

Bunny dug his heels into the carpet. "Wait! I have to go to the bathroom."

"Holy cow! You've been sitting here all night! Couldn't you—"

"I didn't have to till now."

"Hurry up, then. You've got half a minute and no more." Bunny ran down the hall and slammed the bathroom door. Jackie heard the key in the lock; then Bunny began to laugh.

"Don't believe everything you hear," sang Bunny.

"I'll fix you," said Jackie, shaking with rage. "Just as soon as I get back, you're going to be sorry you ever—"

The explosion rattled the windows, cutting off his words. Jackie sagged. It was too late. He had missed it, and all because of Bratso. He would hate his brother for the rest of his life. With dragging feet, he went back to the kitchen. The clock said nine fifty-five. Then Jackie realized he would not have reached the library in time anyway, for in the hassle with Bunny he had forgotten about their slow-running clock.

Bunny came quietly into the kitchen. "Some bang," he said in an odd voice.

"We missed it because of you, Bratso."

"I didn't believe you," said Bunny, the corners of his mouth starting to droop.

"So you missed the fun."

There were tears in Bunny's eyes. "I liked the library," he said.

The next morning Jackie and Bunny were unusually subdued at the table, each sad for a different reason.

"I don't understand what makes kids do the things they do," said Mom, huge in her flowered wrapper. "It serves them right, those two. Friends of yours, Jackie. Slim and Googie."

"What did they do?" asked Jackie, expecting Bunny to pipe up and say that Jackie was supposed to be in on it and why was he pretending he didn't know anything about it?

"Blew up the library and half of themselves with it."

Jackie's stomach bumped inside him. "They got *hurt*?"

"It's right here in the morning paper. Slim's hands got burned and Googie's face." Jackie's mouth dropped open. "Slim admits making the bomb. He said it was set to go off at ten o'clock."

"It did," said Jackie. "I looked at the clock when I heard the explosion and it said five minutes of, so that meant it was ten o'clock."

"Uh-uh," said his mother, shaking her head. "I had that clock fixed yesterday."

"Then the bomb went off five minutes early?"

"Yes. That's how they got hurt."

Jackie looked at Bunny and wondered if he realized he had accidentally helped Jackie, might even have saved his life. Maybe he would have to stop hating Bunny now.

"Jackie can't have any sweet rolls because I just ate the last one."

But then again, maybe not.

FICTION

Afternoon Drive

by Doris Miles Disney

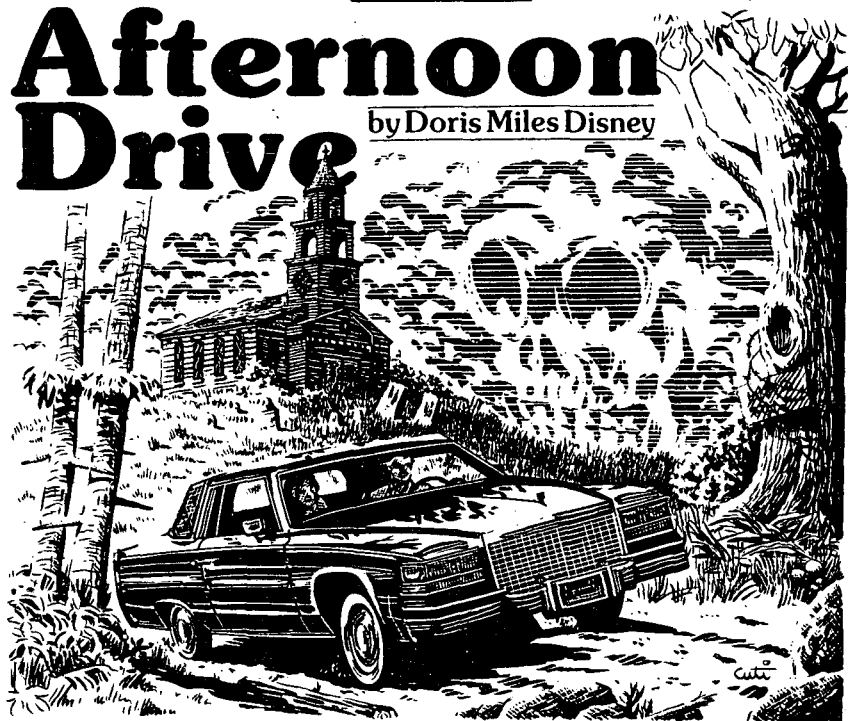


Illustration by Nicola Cuti

Miss Johnson sat down with her in the living room. "I'll just keep you company, Mrs. Curtis, while your husband's getting the car out," she said with professional brightness. "No fun being all by your lonesome."

Mrs. Curtis smiled politely and did not point out that she was never all by her lonesome these days, not with Miss Johnson, her nurse, hovering over her constantly, alert to every move she made, every word she spoke. She wouldn't mention this now or any other time. Pretending that it wasn't happening made it possible to maintain a civilized relationship with Miss Johnson.

Her husband came in and said in the hearty voice he had been using lately, "Car's out front. All set, dear?"

"I think so," she said and stood up knowing, without looking around, that while her husband helped her on with her coat Miss Johnson was somewhere close at hand.

NOTE: As we mentioned in the last issue, when mystery novelist Doris Miles Disney died in 1976, her papers contained two previously unpublished stories, which her daughter has kindly made available to AHMM. "Afternoon Drive" is one of them; for the other, see "Vacation Trip," AHMM, November, 1983. ED.

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"You sure you'll be warm enough?" he inquired solicitously. "Shouldn't you wear your fur coat? What do you think, Miss Johnson?"

"It's a nice mild day. Mrs. Curtis said she didn't want her fur coat."

The nurse spoke stiffly but he seemed not to notice it. "Well, if you think it's all right," he said in the hearty voice that wasn't his at all, that he had imposed upon some image of himself recently created. "We've got to look after her, you know."

His wife said with quiet firmness, "I'll be quite warm enough in this coat, Harvey," and turned toward the door.

He took her arm, slowing his pace to suit hers, gentle and protective as he helped her down the steps and out to the car.

Miss Johnson, trailing after them, halted on the porch and said, "Have a nice ride now, Mrs. Curtis."

Harvey answered for her. "Sure she will," he said. "I'll see to that. But you'd better go inside, Miss Johnson, before you catch cold. You haven't even got a sweater on."

Miss Johnson made no reply. And she did not go inside. She was still standing on the porch when they drove away.

"Any particular place you'd like to go, dear?" Harvey asked.

There was none, no place where tomorrow would never come, never have to be faced. She said, "Wherever you like is all right with me, dear."

He drove downtown as she had known he would, as he did each time they went for a drive. No matter what direction they were going to take in the end, there was first to be endured a trip through the Center, the busy shopping district.

An agony of selfconsciousness that had become all too familiar seized her as soon as they reached Main Street. Rigid in her seat she stared straight ahead and had no way of knowing how many people responded as her husband waved or bowed to them. It didn't matter at the moment. Nothing mattered but to pass the last traffic light on the edge of town. Then they were in a rundown neighborhood where they knew no one and might have been any middle-aged couple out for a drive.

But as she relaxed a little in anonymity and looked out the car window she thought that two women gossiping on a street corner gaped at her or perhaps it was at Harvey in recognition, and that was all she needed to make her shrink into herself again until they were well out into the country where there was no one, not even cows at this time of year, to stare at them.

Harvey said, "Beautiful day. Almost like spring."

"Yes, it is."

"Are you warm enough, dear?"

"Oh yes."

"Well, be sure to tell me when you're ready to turn back. We took too long a drive yesterday. You were tired out when we got home."

"You worry about me too much." As she smiled at her husband she wondered what he would say if she told him her tiredness was beyond the reach of his concern; that it came from deep in her soul and would never leave her.

"Well," he said, "I can't help worrying about you after the scare you gave me."

"I know you can't," she said.

"We've been together a good many years now. Thirty-one, isn't it?"

"Thirty-one next month."

"Next month? Yes, that's right. By golly, we'll have to plan a nice little celebration, just the two of us!"

The falseness of his enthusiasm grated on her ears. How could he talk like that of next month when he too must be asking himself if, after tomorrow, they'd ever be able to plan anything together again?

But of course they would. Of course.

With an inaudible sigh her gaze left the drab winter landscape that made no promises, offered no reassurance, wandered briefly to Harvey—only briefly, though, because somehow, these days, it had become a habit to avoid looking at him for very long—and came to rest on her hands, thinner than they used to be, the blue veins loose and swollen:

Hands, she reflected, betrayed your age. You could fight back at what it did to your face but there was no makeup that would make hands look younger. Have them lifted, perhaps? If facelifting, why not hand-lifting?

She smiled at the notion. Her husband, as watchful as Miss Johnson, saw her smile and said, "Well, dear, what's so funny?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about having my hands lifted."

"Your hands—?" He broke off. What nonsense was that? She couldn't be serious. She'd only said it to put him off.

He felt injured. He was doing everything he could for her but she just took it for granted and shut him out of her thoughts. God alone knew what they were. He himself never had.

Following an involuntary path of their own, her thoughts had turned to younger, prettier hands, a younger, prettier face that probably received much more care than she had ever given hers.

She'd never paid enough attention to her appearance, she knew that now, she'd had time, much time, to think of such things since her illness. It was a weakness in her, her tendency to accept things as they were; a face that was plain, the shyness that held her back from people, her failure to have children, the humdrum course of her life, Harvey's long-established custom of going his own way.

Her mother, she remembered, used to be exasperated by her attitude. But her mother had been beautiful as a young woman; self-confidence must come easily when you were beautiful and surrounded by beaux.

There had been very few of them in her life until Harvey appeared.

She had been so much in love with him, so grateful to him for marrying her that at first she hadn't let herself think about the fact that Harvey had known she had money from the day he met her. But as time passed, as he began to go his own way, she couldn't help thinking about her money; and the more she thought about it the more it drove her back into herself.

Harvey slowed down as they approached an intersection. "We could drive over to Melville and go home from there," he suggested. "But if you feel the least bit tired, dear, we won't go that far."

"I'm not at all tired, dear. And Melville's such a pretty town. Let's go that way."

He turned left toward Melville. They went by a housing development going up on what had been farm land. "Depressing," she said. "Rows and rows of look alikes."

"It's building up out this way. You won't know it in a few years."

"I guess not. This was nothing but a country lane when I was a girl."

So they talked across the void of tomorrow, the meaningless, desultory talk that had been their only mode of communication for years.

How long had it been since they'd said anything of significance to each other?

Years, she thought. Her fault too. Harvey was gay and stimulating company when others were around. She lacked these qualities, the grace of the quick retort, the witty story that brought a roomful of people alive with laughter. And if she did think of something she wanted to say, she was apt to keep it to herself for fear

of sounding dull in comparison with Harvey.

They passed an old schoolhouse, grass grown tall in the yard, vines smothering the sagging brick walls, nature reclaiming the work of man. Not long after they were married, Harvey and she had picnicked one day in the schoolyard and explored the building abandoned even then, thirty years ago. Harvey had stood on the dais and made her helpless with laughter by his impersonation of a schoolmaster.

The memory of that lighthearted day brought a lump to her throat. She said, "The school, Harvey. Do you remember—?"

He glanced without interest at the derelict. "Remember what, dear?"

"Do you remember when they stopped using it?"

"Can't say I do. Looks as if no one's been near it in fifty years."

She wept inside herself as the schoolhouse was left behind. It was no more alone, no more derelict than she. Her memory of it, unshared, lost all brightness and meaning. It was as if Harvey, by forgetting it, had stolen the day from her, erased it from her life. She felt that she couldn't bear it, not when there were so few days like it to remember.

But she had to bear it. It was a small thing to bear, the least trifle, she reminded herself, compared to weeks and weeks of presenting a composed face to her world, suddenly so small, of saying yes, dear, and no, dear, to Harvey and it's all a dreadful mistake, there's nothing to worry about.

The cold thought came: What if tomorrow proved her wrong, stripped her of all defenses, left her the prey of friend and enemy and stranger?

It could not happen. Not possibly. She mustn't let herself think even for a moment that it could.

"Well, here we are coming into Melville," Harvey said.

"Yes." She gave him a serene smile and pointed to the white church spire ahead rising above the treetops toward the cloudless sky. "So picturesque, isn't it?" she said. "A beautiful old church."

"Someone told me it's written up in *Britannica*. Classic example of its type or something."

"Oh, I didn't know that."

"It's one of the oldest churches around here. And the graveyard—" His pause, the waver in his voice were all but imperceptible. "That's even older," he finished hurriedly.

No, they wouldn't talk about graveyards. But she didn't mind thinking about them, old quiet places from which all anguish had

passed and there was only peace.

As they neared the town Harvey said, "Shall we stop at the inn for a cup of coffee, dear?"

Stop at the inn where the proprietor had, in the past, greeted them as friends? Harvey asked a great deal of her these days but this was too much.

"Well," she said keeping her voice dispassionate, "I'm beginning to feel a little tired, I think, and there's still the drive home. So if you don't mind—"

"Of course not!" He was all contrition. "Why didn't you tell me? I could have turned off four or five miles back on that side road that cuts across the parkway and had you home in no time."

"The longer drive doesn't matter, dear. It's just that I don't feel quite up to stopping anywhere."

"Even so—Dr. Huston will sail into me if I let you overtax yourself."

Dr. Huston wouldn't, she knew. He would say nothing to Harvey. But if Harvey wanted to put it that way—

He turned the car toward home on a road that bypassed Melville, still scolding her tenderly and blaming himself for his thoughtlessness in keeping her out too long.

At last she said with a smile, "Harvey, there's no need to fuss over me like this. I'm perfectly all right."

"Well . . ." He subsided for an interval. Then he said, "You must go straight to bed when we get home, dear. Dinner on a tray tonight for you."

Dinner on a tray. With her mind's eye she looked at an assembly line of trays arriving at her bedside. Harvey stood over her urging her to try this, taste that, eat something, dear, how are you going to get your strength back if you don't eat? Her nurse, not Miss Johnson but that awful Miss Wall, said coaxingly, you must eat something, Mrs. Curtis . . . this nice coddled egg . . . isn't the soup good? . . . the custard looks delicious.

But the food had all been bitter as gall.

Now it was Miss Johnson who pressed her to eat. But at least she was out of bed and sat at table. She hadn't had a tray brought to her since the day she told Miss Wall to leave the house.

I'm almost well, she said to Miss Johnson. I don't want to be treated like an invalid.

She didn't say, I have a horror of trays that will last as long as I live.

Harvey, who couldn't let the state of her health alone for any

length of time, said, "Yessir, my lady, straight to bed for you and dinner on a tray."

She didn't say, If you make me go to bed, if Miss Johnson comes near my room with a tray I'll scream and if once I start I'll never be able to stop, not until I die.

She said nothing, smiling noncommittally.

During the rest of the ride they were both inclined to silence until they reached the top of the hill that overlooked the town where her whole life and a good part of Harvey's had been spent. Then he said in his new hearty voice, "Well, we're almost home, dear. No place like it, eh?"

"No place like it," she echoed.

As he turned to smile at her—they smiled at each other a lot these days—she saw terror in his eyes, terror of tomorrow. It shocked her but she could think of no way to comfort him. Or herself.

They drove down the hill into the town where the torture that had begun their drive was now repeated on Main Street in the rush of the late afternoon traffic. She had an impression of even more bowing and waving from Harvey than before; but mercifully, staring straight ahead as she was, she couldn't be sure.

Finally they were home, Harvey helping her out of the car, she looking up with thankfulness at the house where she had been born. In another minute or two she would be hidden inside it. And tomorrow, whatever she had to face, wouldn't, at least, include another drive.

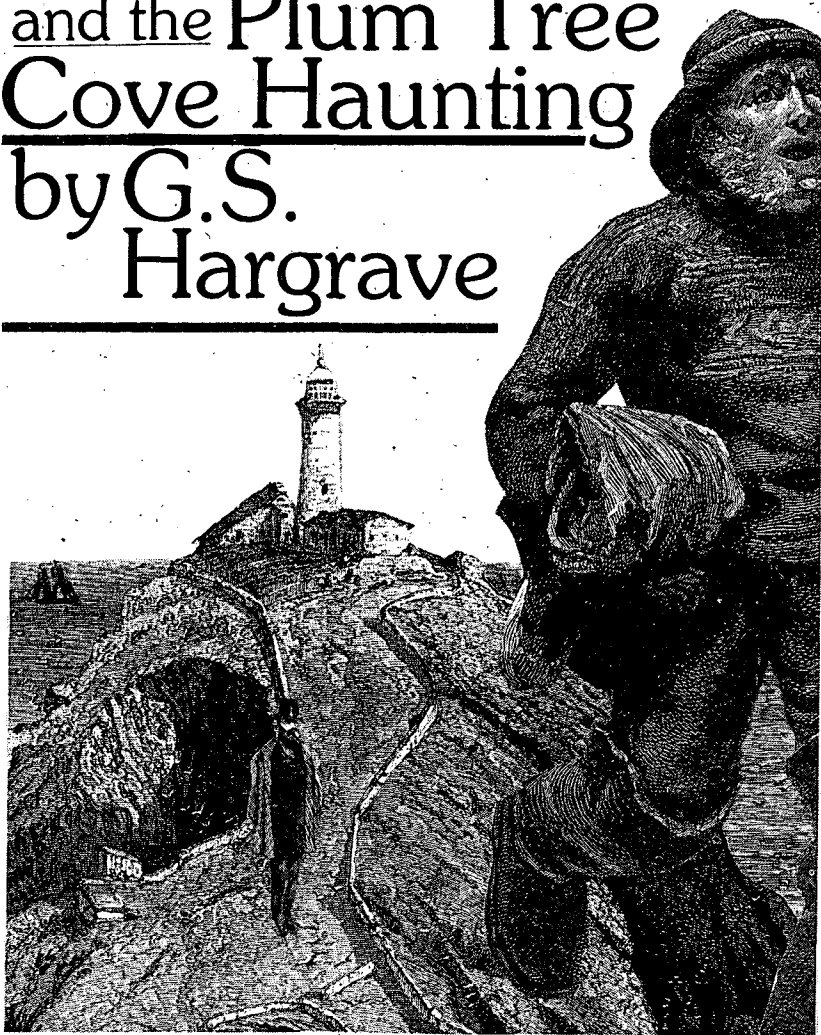
While they were walking up to the front door, she, in her exhaustion, leaning on her husband more than she meant to, the whir of a bicycle behind them announced the arrival of the boy who delivered the evening paper. She was nearer to him than Harvey, he handed the paper to her, his eyes round and big in his face.

"Thank you," she said and folded the paper inward without looking at the headline on the first page. She didn't need to look at it to know what it said; that tomorrow Harvey Curtis would go on trial, accused of the attempted murder of his wife by arsenic poisoning.

Miss Johnson, her guard, her guardian angel or whatever she was, watching for them, opened the front door before they reached the steps and caroled, "Well, Mrs. Curtis, did you have a nice drive?"

"Lovely," she replied and began slowly to climb the steps.

Wilbur Pettyman and the Plum Tree Cove Haunting by G.S. Hargrave



The house was everything that Wilbur Pettyman had imagined. An enormous old frame structure with white clapboard siding and faded green trim, it perched high up on the far end of the rugged, windswept promontory, peering out over the whitecapped Atlantic to the north and east, and down upon the harbor and little village of Plum Tree Cove to the south. There was a look of timeless permanence about it, for it had been built with all the same care and deliberation the old New England craftsmen had put into the making of their once-famous wooden ships. A picket fence ran around the yard, its wood grayed by years of exposure to sun and storm and salty spray. There was, to the rear, a towering stand of dark and ancient pines. From a gate beneath them, perilously steep wooden steps led down to a rock beach.

An interesting architectural detail of the old house was its curious octagonal cupola, situated on the peak of the roof. A favorite roosting spot for seagulls, it boasted panes of glass on every side that reflected sky and clouds from all points of the compass.

Alva Atwood, real estate agent extraordinaire, watched Wilbur Pettyman's plump, pink-cheeked face with considerable

professional interest. Atwood had been in the real estate business for a long time. He'd seen that look before.

"This old house is a steal at forty-six thousand, Mr. Pettyman. Won't be on the market long at a price like that."

"Can we look inside?"

"Sure. Electricity is shut off, though."

Atwood unlocked the front door, and they went into the dim interior. Century-old floorboards creaked underfoot. "Just look at all that wood, Mr. Pettyman. That's solid oak planking, a full inch thick. Even if a man could find lumber like that nowadays, he couldn't afford to buy it. Not a nail in it, either. It's all put together with pegs."

They moved from room to room, Atwood keeping up a running commentary on each of the house's unusual features. The inside was cavernous and dusty, with a hint of dampness in the air. There was an odd assortment of antique furnishings, and empty kerosene lanterns were scattered here and there. The old house looked as though it hadn't been lived in for a very long time.

"Who's the owner?"

"Fella by the name of Sloan,"

Atwood responded. "Lives down in New York. I think I heard he's a writer or something. He was up here for a while a couple

of summers back, then left all of a sudden. Haven't seen him since."

"It's certainly big." Pettyman was thinking about heating costs.

"It is that. You know, Mr. Pettyman, a smart man might do things with a house like this. It's a nice, private location. Might make a real nice guest-house, if you added on a couple of baths."

Pettyman blinked myopically at Atwood. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Matter of fact, there's another fella interested in the place with just that in mind. He figures on renting out the upstairs rooms during the summers. Say, two hundred a week per guest for room and board. The place could bring in a pretty nice piece of change. Why, I suppose it could almost pay for itself. Not to mention the tax advantages..."

The mention of potential profits and a competing buyer were time-honored tactics in the real estate game. Alva Atwood had the greatest respect for tradition.

"Do a lot of visitors come to Plum Tree Cove?"

"Oh, sure. It's still a little early in the year yet, but we're quite the tourist attraction. Our big season starts in June, and runs through late September."

"What do they come here for?"

"Local color, Mr. Pettyman. Plum Tree Cove is one of those 'quaint New England villages' you're always reading about in your Sunday supplements. I suppose the wharf and the lobster fleet are our biggest draws. Then there are a couple of antique shops the city folks like."

"What about off-season?"

"It's quiet as a graveyard around here. We have a local theater company—the Plum Tree Players—and put on a couple of plays each year. You know—just to keep us all from going crazy with boredom. Then there are the town meetings, church socials, volunteer fire department fish fries, stuff like that." Atwood smiled. "But we make more than enough money during the tourist season to get us through the rest of the year."

They went out on the back sunporch, which ran the full length of the old house on the side facing the ocean. Tall, closely-spaced windows afforded a fine view of the stand of pines, the steps leading down to the beach, and the far horizon, where blue of sky met blue of sea. Flowerpots gathered dust on the sill, the earth they contained dry and cracked.

"Now *there's* an impressive view," Atwood commented.

Wilbur Pettyman had fallen

silent, as though contemplating the beauty of the panoramic seascape just beyond the dusty windowpanes. Actually, Wilbur had very little use for such things. His practical accountant's mind was at that very moment busily converting upstairs bedrooms into guest rooms, and those, in turn, into dollars and cents.

The place might be a real moneymaker, he thought, if he could just keep his overhead down. With Mildred to do all of the cooking and housekeeping, it shouldn't prove to be too difficult. Why, it was just the sort of situation that he wanted for his upcoming retirement!

Mildred, of course, might present a bit of a problem. It was her idea to find a little cottage in the country and spend her time piddling around with her flowers and reading her damn novels. She thought they had plenty of money already. Imagine! As if anyone could ever have enough money!

The Pettyman Seaside Inn, Wilbur mused. That sort of had a nice ring to it.

"If you look way off to the north," Atwood was saying, "you can just make out the site of the old Devil's Reef lighthouse. There's not much left now but a ruin." He glanced at the distracted Wilbur Pettyman. "You don't believe in ghosts, do you,

Mr. Pettyman?"

Pettyman, lost in an accountant's fantasy of steadily increasing bank account balances, was suddenly attentive. "What? Ghosts? Of course not!"

"I didn't imagine you did. Well, neither do I."

"What do ghosts have to do with anything?"

Atwood looked sheepish. "Oh, it's just one of those stories. You know—the sort of thing you hear when you're a kid. It has to do with the Devil's Reef lighthouse. Matter of fact, this very house figures into the tale."

"How's that?" Pettyman asked.

Alva Atwood gazed at the ceiling, as if trying to recall the details of a story he hadn't heard in years. "Let's see—it was back before the turn of the century, if I remember right. The house was owned by a fella by the name of Coffin—Zachariah Coffin. And his brother—Theo, I think—was keeper of the Devil's Reef lighthouse." He chuckled to himself. "Sure—I remember." He glanced apologetically at Wilbur Pettyman. "You sure you want to hear this? It's really too absurd a tale to waste your time with."

"I'd like to hear it," Pettyman said. He hadn't had many friends, back in his own school-boy days, and he was curious about the kind of stories At-

wood had mentioned.

Atwood shrugged. "Back then, one of the town's most important industries was salvage. 'Wrecking,' they used to call it. In the case of the Coffin brothers, the old term really fit the bill. During stormy nights, it seems, Theo—he was the younger of the two—would put out the beacon over at the Devil's Reef lighthouse. Then ol' Zachariah would light up a false beacon, right up in the cupola on top of the roof." Atwood gestured beyond the window. "The waters out there are full of rock and reef, Mr. Pettyman. The only safe passage was off to the north, marked by the light. Ships following the false beacon in would run smack into the reef, and break up. The Coffin brothers and their henchmen would be waiting down there on the beach, to salvage whatever washed up. And anybody lucky enough to make it to shore from the wreck got his throat cut for his trouble."

"That's a true story?"

"What I've told you so far. Things went on like that for better than twenty years before they finally got caught at it. They strung up Theo and the rest on a ship right down in the cove. All except for Zachariah, that is. He somehow managed to avoid capture and vanished without a trace."

"What about the ghost?"

"Ghosts, actually. That's where someone's imagination took over. Legend has it that the ghosts of all the murdered sailors and passengers come up here now and then, looking for Zachariah Coffin."

"That's ridiculous." Wilbur Pettyman smiled smugly. Apparently he hadn't missed anything during his own schoolboy days, save for a lot of foolishness.

"I told you so." Atwood smiled. "Of course, it's also part of that 'local color' the tourists seem to like so much." He winked conspiratorially. "If paying customers enjoy believing in stuff like that, who are you and I to discourage them?"

They drove down the winding dirt road to town, and Alva Atwood invited Wilbur Pettyman inside for a cup of coffee. His real estate office was in the front of his own rather modest little cottage.

"Well, Mr. Pettyman . . . are you interested?"

"I might be. Your advertisement mentioned contract terms. What, exactly, did the owner have in mind?"

"The terms Mr. Sloan offers are excellent: ten percent down, with the balance payable in equal monthly installments over ten years." Atwood leaned forward over his desk. "And *no in-*

terest, Mr. Pettyman. Imagine! The payments would be less than three hundred and fifty a month."

"You can't be serious."

"But I am. The owner is most anxious to sell." Atwood became pensive. "If my own business were doing better, I think I'd be tempted myself."

"I'll have to think it over, of course."

"Tell you what I'll do, Mr. Pettyman. I have a copy of the land contract I can let you have. You can take it to your attorney, and have him look it over. If you're still interested, give me a call next week." He took a sheaf of papers from his desk drawer, a business card from his pocket, and slid them across to Wilbur Pettyman. "If you're not, there's no need to call me. I imagine I'll find a buyer in a week or two."

Clarence P. Cheatum, of the prestigious Boston law firm of Dewey, Cheatum, and Howe, ran a practiced eye over the final page of the land contract.

"There are a couple of rather unusual provisions here, Wilbur. The ten percent down payment, for instance, is to be paid directly to Alva Atwood. It would appear to be his commission. Also, in the event that you should decide to resell before

the terms of the contract are completed, there's a clause that would require you to retain Mr. Atwood as your agent. He would have the exclusive right to represent you for a period of one year from the date the house first goes back on the market."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Not a thing, Wilbur. It's just a little unusual." Clarence looked up from the document. "It looks real good to me, Wilbur. All nice and tidy. No flaws, no faults, no traps or snares."

Wilbur Pettyman nodded happily.

"Of course, that's no guarantee that you'd be getting your money's worth. Are you sure you aren't buying a house full of termites?"

"It's worth much more than the owner is asking, Clarence. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity."

Clarence spread his hands, palms up. "If you say so."

Wilbur refolded the papers and put them back in his vest pocket, then stood to leave. "I really appreciate your working me into your schedule like this, Clarence. I know you're a very busy man."

"Hey, Wilbur—think nothing of it! You're more to me than just a brother-in-law; you know. You're also a good friend." They shook hands. "I'll send you a bill."

On Wednesday of the following week, Wilbur called Alva Atwood to let him know that he wanted the house. He took off from work and drove up to Plum Tree Cove the very next day. All the legal papers were signed and duly notarized, and he presented Alva Atwood with a cashier's check in the amount of four thousand six hundred dollars. Atwood turned over the keys, and the transaction was complete. Wilbur Pettyman had his dream castle.

The following Saturday found Wilbur Pettyman back in Plum Tree Cove, intent upon spending his first weekend in the old house overlooking the sea. Mildred, who had been dead against buying the house from the start, had declined to accompany him, pleading that she felt a cold coming on. Not that Wilbur really minded. He looked forward to having the weekend to himself. Besides, he wanted to get the place swept up and aired out a bit before she saw it, as he was anxious that it make a good first impression on her.

He had, of course, neglected to mention to her the local tradition about the place being haunted, fearing that all the mystery novels she had read had made her susceptible to such superstitious nonsense. It

wouldn't do at all for her to feel uncomfortable about the old house, seeing that her presence there would be such a critical factor in keeping down his costs. Good help didn't come cheap these days.

To his disappointment, he found that the electricity hadn't been turned on as Atwood had promised. He drove back to town and stopped by Atwood's office, but found the place closed and Atwood's cottage locked up. Remembering all the kerosene lanterns that sat gathering dust throughout the house, he stopped at Plum Tree Cove's single filling station to obtain a supply of fuel.

The attendant, a taciturn old man in oilstained white coveralls with a shock of unkempt gray hair, was clearly annoyed that all Wilbur wanted was a couple of gallons of kerosene. He filled the tins from a fifty gallon drum out behind the station, grumbling to himself as Wilbur watched.

"Pretty nice day," Wilbur ventured.

"Gonna storm," the man said matter-of-factly.

Wilbur gazed up at the cloudless sky, wondering if the old man were just being contrary. He decided another attempt at polite conversation was in order. After all, the old man was going to be a neighbor. Friendly

neighbors could be useful. "I just bought the big house up on the promontory."

The old man looked up from the tin, suddenly attentive. "It's about time somebody burned the place down." He screwed on the cap. "If that's what the kerosene is for, it's on the house."

Wilbur flushed, then decided to take this as a joke. The old codger was cantankerous, all right. "Actually, it's for the lamps. The electricity isn't turned on yet."

"In that case, it'll be a buck fifty a tin."

Wilbur felt in his coat pocket, annoyed. "This is all Alva Atwood's fault. He promised he'd have the lights turned on." He handed the old man the money. "You haven't seen him, have you?"

"He's outa town." The old man made a point of recounting the money.

"Well, that's not very responsible of him. He promised he'd have them turned on."

The old man fixed Wilbur with a hard stare. "His mother died yesterday. I guess he just forgot about your lights."

"Oh. I—I didn't know."

"'Course you didn't know. Why would anybody have told you?" The old man studied Wilbur Pettyman for a moment, then gestured vaguely in the direction of the house on the

promontory. "You staying up there?"

"Sure," Wilbur said. "Like I told you, I just bought the place."

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

"Why not?"

The old man raised his eyebrows.

"Didn't Atwood tell you?"

"You mean, all that nonsense about the place being haunted?" Pettyman drew himself up to his whole five feet five inches. "Surely you don't believe that?"

The old man pocketed the money, looking at Pettyman queerly and shaking his head. He turned and went inside without so much as another word.

Odd, Wilbur thought.

Back at the house, Wilbur's first project was to open all the storm shutters and windows, to let in a little air and light. That done, he threw himself into the task of ridding the old house of a couple of years' accumulation of dust and mildew.

Wilbur was unaccustomed to such work and, as the day progressed, was surprised at how much effort was involved in giving the place even a superficial cleaning. He momentarily regretted that Mildred had not come with him. Still, he found himself whistling cheerfully as he went about his labors. He liked the old house. He

somehow felt that he belonged there.

Hours later, as the shadows of the house and cupola reached toward the ancient pines at the edge of the yard, Wilbur went upstairs to select the bedroom he would use for the night. The one he chose boasted a brass fourposter bed. He unrolled his new sleeping bag on top of the bare mattress.

This had evidently been the master bedroom, judging from its size and location. There was an enormous walk-in closet and, right beside it, a second door. Trying the knob, he found it to be locked. He tested each of the keys on the ring Atwood had given him, disappointed to find the last as useless as the others. Frustrated, he got down on his hands and knees and peered through the keyhole. All he could make out on the other side were several steps of what appeared to be a narrow, spiral staircase.

Of course! The steps would lead up through the attic, to the cupola high on the roof. He longed to climb those steps, to survey his domain from what was surely the highest observation point in the vicinity of Plum Tree Cove. If the key didn't turn up, it ought to be an easy matter to slip the pins from the door's hinges.

Noticing that the room was

growing dim, Wilbur Pettyman glanced down at his watch. It was nearly seven o'clock, and he realized that he was very hungry. There was certainly nothing in the long-disused kitchen to prepare. He would have to go into town.

As he locked the back door behind him, he shivered in the cold wind that was blowing in from the ocean. Waves were crashing heavily on the rocky shore far below, and there were dark clouds mounting on the eastern horizon. Perhaps the old man had been right. Perhaps it would storm after all.

Wilbur drove into town, and made a satisfying meal of fried chicken and cold beer. Later, as he drove through the darkness, up the winding road that led to the house from town, the first heavy drops of rain began to pelt his windshield. By the time he arrived, it was pouring. The tops of the dark pines whipped in the wind.

The exertion of the day, the generous meal, and the unaccustomed enjoyment of several bottles of beer all conspired together to induce sleep. Wilbur wearily climbed the staircase, glowing kerosene lamp in hand, to his bedroom on the second floor. He immediately undressed, blew out the lamp, and wriggled into his sleeping bag. The room was cold, but it wasn't

more than a few minutes before he felt comfortably warm. All around him, the timbers of the big house creaked in the wind. Soon he was sound asleep.

Shortly before three in the morning, there came a thunderous crash, so loud that every loose pane of glass in the old house rattled in its sash.

Wilbur Pettyman sat bolt upright in a spasm of pure terror, struggling in the dark against some unknown thing that prevented him from moving his arms and legs. Then there came a second flash of lightning and clap of thunder, and he realized that it had only been the storm. The strange paralysis affecting his arms and legs was only his somewhat twisted sleeping bag.

He lay back on the mattress, chiding himself for his childish reaction. He had probably been dreaming. All that foolish talk about storms and beacons and drowned sailors and hauntings was enough to give even the most rational of men nightmares. Particularly when combined with a heavy meal too close to bedtime.

Wilbur turned onto his side, facing the darkness where the walk-in closet and the locked door to the cupola were. Lightning flashed.

For an instant, Wilbur Pet-

tyman thought his heart was going to stop.

The door he had thought to be locked stood open. In the momentary flash he had seen the portal, the door standing wide, and the narrow steps beyond spiraling up into the darkness.

Wilbur swallowed back a lump that had risen in his throat. "This is ridiculous," he said. The sound of his voice was little more than a tremulous squeak.

He got out of the sleeping bag, shivering as his feet touched the cold floor, and crossed the dark room in search of matches. They seemed to have disappeared. He finally found them, and lit the lamp with an unsteady hand.

It is nothing less than amazing how the reassuring glow of a lamp can bolster one's courage, dispelling irrational fears right along with the darkness. So it was with Wilbur Pettyman. "I must have unlocked it earlier without knowing it," Pettyman said to himself. His voice was almost normal. "Sure! I unlocked it without knowing it, and then the wind blew it open."

That mystery explained to his satisfaction, Wilbur Pettyman decided the time was right to inspect the cupola. He climbed the spiral staircase, which led

up through an opening in the floor of the observation tower.

The interior was larger than he had supposed, when he had seen it from the yard outside. Ripply glass panes completely surrounded him. The scent of dust and dampness was particularly strong.

It was here, the legend went, that Zachariah Coffin had lit his false beacon.

Wilbur peered out into the darkness beyond the glass, through the rain. Those distant lights, down there to the south, would be Plum Tree Cove. And there, out along the beach . . .

Wilbur pressed his face against the pane, looking down toward the beach. He could make out figures, carrying lanterns, in the incessant flickering of the storm. What could they be doing down there at this ungodly hour? He could follow their movements, stopping and starting, up and down the beach, by the motions of the lanterns they carried. It was almost as if they were searching for something.

Wilbur watched the strange spectacle until, one by one, the mysterious lights on the beach went out.

"How very odd," he said to himself.

As he was about to turn away from the glass, something else caught his eye. It was a sort of

indistinct motion, below the pines, right at the top of the steps that led up to his yard from the beach. He stared, straining his eyes into the darkness. At that moment the sky flashed, throwing an eerie light over the whole scene.

Wilbur recoiled from the glass in horror.

At the top of the stairs stood at least half a dozen people. There was a woman in a long white dress, soaking wet, and men dressed in the manner of nineteenth century sailors. All their pale faces were turned up, gazing at the cupola.

The lantern Wilbur held could surely be plainly seen from below. From far out at sea, for that matter. It must give the appearance of—of a *beacon*!

"Oh my God!" Wilbur Pettyman stumbled down the stairs, his grip on reason weakening. Back in the bedroom, he threw his raincoat on over his underwear, patting the pocket to make sure the car keys were still there. He had to get to the car. If he could just do that, he might be able to get away.

He left the back door banging in the wind and went half-running and half-stumbling down the walk toward the side gate. As he rushed through, though, it snagged the tail of his coat, nearly jerking him off his feet.

Frantically tugging at it, he

suddenly felt a presence on the walk behind him. He slowly turned around.

Lightning flashed. The people he had seen from the cupola were there, their nineteenth century clothes streaming water and tangled with seaweed. The man in front slowly raised an arm to point at Wilbur, his eyes wide and glaring, filled with hatred and madness.

Wilbur's mouth dropped open. The man's throat was cut from ear to ear, a horrid, gaping wound. And then the apparition spoke, its voice a shriek above the fury of the storm:

"ZACHARIAH COFFIN!"

Wilbur's kerosene lamp crashed to the stones, instantly extinguished by the pouring rain. There was a loud ripping of cloth. "Nooooooooo!" Wilbur Pettyman vanished down the path toward his car at a speed no one would have imagined him capable of, his tattered raincoat flapping like a cape behind him. A moment later there was a squeal of tortured rubber, and his car went careening down the winding road

toward Plum Tree Cove.

Alva Atwood, real estate agent extraordinaire, sat in his office, feet propped up on his desk. His clothing, a sailor's costume that did double duty in local productions of *The Pirates of Penzance*, was still dripping wet from the rain. He shared a pot of hot coffee with the other members of the Plum Tree Players, similarly attired and equally wet.

"This must have been one of our better off-season performances, if I do say so myself."

Old man Wilson, part-time actor and full-time filling station attendant, nodded in agreement. "Of course, the storm helped immensely. Having the right props means so much." He pulled off his dripping wig. "What was the take this time?"

"Forty-six hundred bucks. Not bad, for a one-night stand." He smiled. "I believe we've made quite an impression on Mr. Pettyman. With any luck at all, the place ought to be back on the market inside a month."

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One Man's Money, Another Man's Trash

by James A. Noble

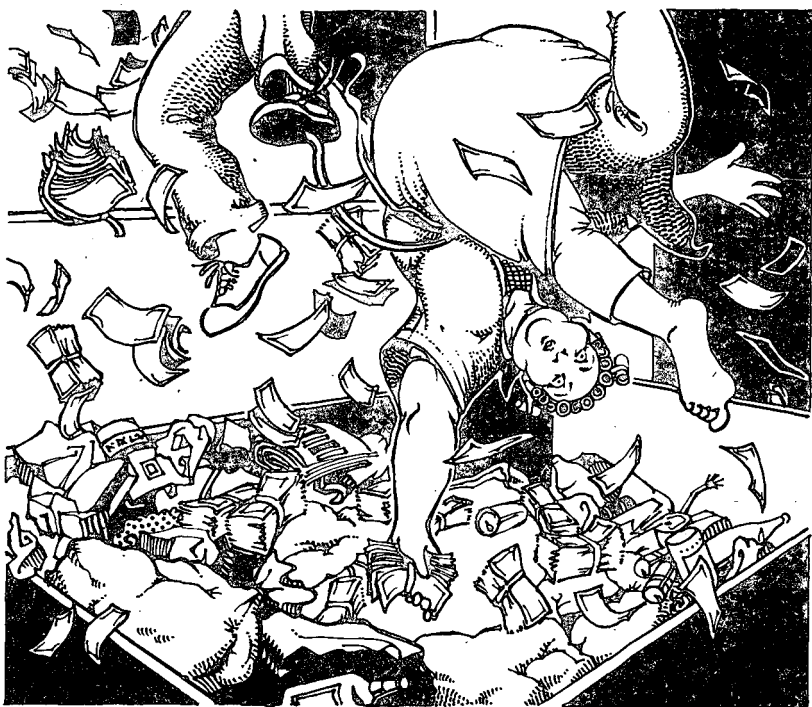


Illustration by Lisa Knouse

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“Have you got the money?” asked the voice on the phone.

“Yes, just like you wanted it. Fives and tens, all old bills, in bundles of a thousand each,” replied Mr. Emery. “Please don’t harm Elaine.”

“One hundred thousand?”

“Yes . . . yes. Let me talk to my wife. I’ve done all you’ve asked so far.”

There was a short pause.

“Edward?” It was his wife’s voice. “Oh, Edward. Please help me. I’m so frightened.”

“Don’t worry, darling,” said Mr. Emery, his voice a tremor. “I’m going to pay the ransom. You’ll be home soon.”

“They’ll kill . . .” She was cut off and the kidnapper’s voice took her place.

“That’s enough. You put the money in a suitcase and be by your phone tomorrow morning at ten o’clock. You’ll get the rest of your instructions then. Don’t cross us if you ever expect to see your wife alive again.” The phone went dead.

Sergeant Vicker turned off the tape recorder and removed his headphones. “Don’t fret, Mr. Emery. We’ll be ready. Sergeant Ager will be parked right outside this apartment building. Wherever you’re told to go, he’ll be following you to the drop. Then we’ll stake it out,

tail the pickup man to their hideout, and move in.”

“You said ‘their hideout,’” noted Emery. “Do you think there’s more than one kidnapper?”

“I’m nearly positive,” answered the sergeant. “You heard him say ‘don’t cross us . . .’”

Emery stood at the sliding glass doors leading to the balcony of his luxurious sixth floor apartment and looked down at the lights from the shorter neighboring buildings. “If they harm her . . . I’m almost sorry I brought the police in on this.”

“You did the right thing,” Vicker assured him. “Why don’t you try to get some sleep?”

The next day, Tooter was up early to do a little shopping. By the time he returned to the apartment building, ten o’clock was fast approaching.

“You get the laundry basket?” asked Spider.

Tooter pulled the rectangular plastic basket from the large shopping bag. “Right here.”

“Did you try it out?”

“Yep. Fits perfect.”

“Getaway car gassed up?”

“Everything’s taken care of, Spider. I did just what you told me.”

“Good. Let’s review the plan. You go into action when I make the phone call. Don’t waste any

time. As soon as you figure you got all the money in the basket, go right out front. Take the stairs. Don't use the elevator. I'll be waiting with the car."

"Do you think Emery brought in the police?" asked Tooter, looking worried.

"It won't make any difference. They'll be out back trying to break into the basement trash room. They'll never suspect we're two floors above them."

"What about Mrs. Emery?"

Spider fell silent and Tooter knew better than to ask any more questions.

As ten o'clock drew near, Emery became nervous.

"Take it easy," said Vicker in his most calming voice. "Everything is going to be fine."

Just then, the phone rang. Emery hesitated while Vicker turned on the recorder and adjusted his headphones, then he lifted the receiver.

"Emery?" inquired the voice on the phone.

"Yes."

"Listen good. You've got exactly ten seconds to go to the trash chute on your floor. Take the money out of the suitcase and toss it into the chute. Ten seconds." The line went dead.

Sergeant Vicker dropped the headset and grabbed the walkie-talkie on the couch. "Ager, the kidnappers are in the build-

ing, in the trash room in the basement. Move!" He turned to Emery.

"Do what he said but don't dump it down the chute all at once. Stall for time."

Tooter left the second floor apartment he and Spider had rented under assumed names and crossed the hall into the small room where the trash chute was located. He opened the door to the shaft and held the laundry basket inside by its edges. Seconds later, bundles of money began dropping into it.

Tooter giggled with delight.

Myrtle Pruitt, hair in curlers, still wearing her pajamas and robe this late in the morning, shuffled out of her fourth floor apartment with the morning garbage. She wasn't quite fully awake yet, but when she reached the room down the hall and opened the small door to the trash chute, she became instantly alert. Bundles of money were dropping down the vertical shaft from one of the upper floors. She knew some of the tenants up there were disgustingly rich, but throw money away? She dropped her trash bag and reached into the shaft, trying desperately to catch the money as it zipped past, but it simply bounced off her open hands and continued its

downward journey. She reached farther into the chute until she finally caught a bundle just as her feet came out of her bedroom slippers. She let out an earpiercing scream as she tumbled into the shaft.

The laundry basket was becoming heavy as the money collected in it and Tooter tightened his grip. That was a mistake. He barely had time to determine where the scream had come from when a wide-eyed woman in a bathrobe landed in his basket.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Tooter—and he was pulled into the chute with the hapless housewife.

Murray, the regular sanitation worker on this route, had seen it all. There was hardly anything that would raise an eyebrow on his head.

He unlocked the big double doors to the basement trash room so he could pull the big trash bin on wheels out to the sanitation truck. When he heard the yelling and screaming coming from the opening in the chute above the bin, he positioned his unlit cigar stub in the left corner of his mouth, leaned back against the wall, and waited to see what was going to happen. His keen eyes spotted something pop out of

the chute opening and disappear in an explosion of paper and rubbish into the big trash bin.

"Let me see . . ." he mumbled to himself, trying to take account of what he had witnessed. "One woman, a guy, a laundry basket, and money. . . . Money?" He raised an eyebrow.

Sergeant Ager, gun drawn, came through the double doors. "Freeze. Police. Identify yourself."

Murray casually removed the cigar stub from his mouth and looked down at his uniform which proclaimed him in large block letters to be a member of the city sanitation crew. This guy must be kidding, he thought. "I'm the executive vice president of a large international commodities exchange corporation," he responded sarcastically.

By this time, Myrtle was climbing out of the trash wagon still clutching the bundle of money in one hand. She was shaking and appeared to be unaware of her surroundings. Sergeant Ager walked over and gently removed the money from her hand.

"Fell . . . money . . . trash . . . chute. . ." she said in a trembling voice.

"Just relax now," said the sergeant.

"It's all over. You're going

to be all right."

"Man . . . " She motioned weakly toward the trash bin.

"She is trying to tell you there's a guy still in there," said Murray.

Ager hoisted himself up onto the edge of the bin and tried to help the semi-conscious man he found inside to his feet.

Spider was just leaving the second story apartment to get the car when he heard the commotion coming from the room where the trash chute was located. He raced in and was surprised to find Tooter had completely disappeared. He opened the door to the chute and leaned in to take a look. Below him, he could see Tooter trying to stagger to his feet.

"Oops," said a voice above him and Spider twisted his head to try to look up the shaft. The suitcase that Emery had let slip

from his hands as he was dumping the last of the money caught Spider squarely on the jaw and he too fell into the shaft. Tooter had just gotten on his feet when his partner crashed down on top of him.

Sergeant Ager handcuffed the two unconscious men together and pulled them from the trash bin. He found a key to a second floor apartment in Spider's coat pocket.

When Sergeant Vicker and Edward Emery joined Ager, he turned the two suspects over to some uniformed patrolmen, and the three men dashed upstairs to the second floor.

They opened the door to the kidnappers' apartment. Emery heard his wife's voice coming from behind a partially closed bedroom door.

"Spider? Is that you honey? Did you get the money from the old goat yet?"

SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Bill was the younger boy, John the older. The interview took place on Tuesday.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

TALBOYS

by
Dorothy L. Sayers

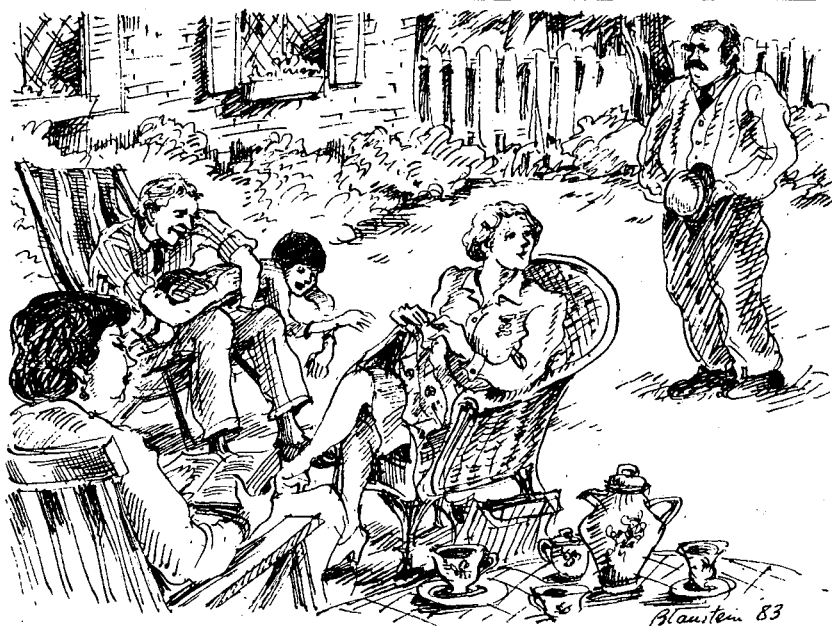


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

“F^ather!”

“Yes, my son.”

“You know those peaches of Mr. Puffett’s, the whacking great big ones you said I wasn’t to take?”

“Well?”

“Well, I’ve taken them.”

Lord Peter Wimsey rolled over on his back and stared at his offspring in consternation. His wife laid down her sewing.

“Oh, Bredon, how naughty! Poor Mr. Puffett was going to exhibit them at the Flower Show.”

“Well, Mummy, I didn’t mean to. It was a dare.”

Having offered this explanation for what it was worth, Master Bredon Wimsey again turned candid eyes upon his father, who groaned and sat up.

“And *must* you come and tell me about it? I hope, Bredon, you are not developing into a prig.”

“Well, Father, Mr. Puffett saw me. An’ he’s coming up to have a word with you when he’s put on a clean collar.”

“Oh, I see,” said his lordship, relieved. “And you thought you’d better come and get it over before my temper became further inflamed by hearing his version of the matter?”

“Yes, please, sir.”

“That is rational, at any rate. Very well, Bredon. Go up into my bedroom and prepare for execution. You will find the cane behind the dressing table.”

“Yes, Father. You won’t be long, will you, sir?”

“I shall allow precisely the right time for apprehension and remorse. Off with you!”

The culprit vanished hastily in the direction of the house; the executioner heaved himself to his feet and followed at a leisurely pace, rolling up his sleeves as he went with a certain grimness.

“My dear!” exclaimed Miss Quirk. She gazed in horror through her spectacles at Harriet, who had placidly returned to her patchwork. “Surely, *surely* you don’t allow him to cane that mite of a child.”

“Allow?” said Harriet, amused. “That’s hardly the right word, is it?”

“But Harriet, dear, he oughtn’t to do it. You don’t realize how dangerous it is. He may ruin the boy’s character for life. One must reason with these little people, not break their spirit by brutality. When you inflict pain and humiliation on a child like that, you

make him feel helpless and inferior, and all that suppressed resentment will break out later in the most extraordinary and shocking ways."

"Oh, I don't think he resents it," said Harriet. "He's devoted to his father."

"Well, if he is," retorted Miss Quirk, "it must be a sort of masochism, and it ought to be stopped—I mean, it ought to be led gently in some other direction. It's unnatural. How could anyone feel a *healthy* devotion for a person who beats him?"

"I can't think; but it often seems to happen. Peter's mother used to lay into him with a slipper, and they've always been the best of friends."

"If I had a child belonging to me," said Miss Quirk, "I would never permit anybody to lay a hand on him. All my little nephews and nieces have been brought up on enlightened modern lines. They never even hear the word 'don't.' Now, you see what happens. Just *because* your boy was told *not* to pick the peaches, he picked them. If he hadn't been forbidden to do it, he wouldn't have been disobedient."

"No," said Harriet, "I suppose that's quite true. He would have picked the peaches just the same, but it wouldn't have been disobedience."

"Exactly," cried Miss Quirk, triumphantly. "You see—you manufacture a crime and then punish the poor child for it. Besides if it hadn't been for the prohibition, he'd have left the fruit alone."

"You don't know Bredon. He never leaves anything alone."

"Of course not," said Miss Quirk, "and he never will, so long as you surround him with prohibitions. His meddling with what doesn't belong to him is just an act of defiance."

"He's not defiant very often," said Harriet, "but of course it's very difficult to refuse a dare from a big boy like George Waggett. I expect it was George; it usually is."

"No doubt," observed Miss Quirk, "the village children are all brought up in an atmosphere of faultfinding and defiance. That kind of thing is contagious. Democratic principles are all very well, but I should scarcely have thought it wise to expose your little boy to contamination."

"Would you forbid him to play with George Waggett?"

Miss Quirk was not to be caught.

"I should never *forbid* anything. I should endeavor to suggest some more suitable companion. Bredon could be encouraged to look

after his little brother; that would give him a useful outlet for his energies and allow him to feel himself important."

"Oh, but he's really good with Roger," said Harriet, equably. She looked up, to see chastiser and chastised emerging from the house, hand in hand. "They seem to be quite good friends. Bredon was rather uplifted when he was promoted to a cane; he thinks it dignified and grown-up. . . . Well, ruffian, how many did you get?"

"Three," said Master Bredon confidentially. "Awful hard ones. One for being naughty, an' one for being young ass enough to be caught, and one for making a 'fernal nuisance of myself on a hot day."

"Oh, dear," said Miss Quirk, appalled by the immorality of all this. "And are you sorry for having taken poor Mr. Puffett's peaches, so that he can't get a prize at the Show?"

Bredon looked at her in astonishment.

"We've done all that," he said, with a touch of indignation. His father thought it well to intervene.

"It's a rule in this household," he announced, "that once we've been whacked, nothing more can be said. The topic is withdrawn from circulation."

"Oh," said Miss Quirk. She still felt that something ought to be done to compensate the victim of brutality and relieve his repressions. "Well, as you're a good boy, would you like to come and sit on my knee?"

"No, thank you," said Bredon. Training, or natural politeness, prompted him to amplify the refusal. "Thank you very much all the same."

"A more tactless suggestion," said Peter, "I never heard."

He dropped into a deck chair, picked up his son and heir by the waist belt, and slung him face downwards across his knees. "You'll have to eat your tea on all fours, like Nebuchadnezzar."

"Who was Nebuchadnezzar?"

"Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the Jews—" began Peter. His version of that monarch's iniquities was interrupted by the appearance, from behind the house, of a stout figure, unsuitably clad for the season in sweater, corduroy trousers, and bowler hat. "The curse is come upon me, cried the Lady of Shalott."

"Who was the Lady of Shalott?"

"I'll tell you at bedtime. Here is Mr. Puffett, breathing out threatenings and slaughter. We must now stand up and face the music. 'Afternoon, Puffett."

"'Arternoon, me lord and me lady," said Mr. Puffett. He removed his bowler and mopped his streaming brow. "And miss," he added, with a vague gesture in Miss Quirk's direction. "I made bold, me lord, to come round—"

"That," said Peter, "was very kind of you. Otherwise, of course, we should have come to see you and say we were sorry. We were overcome by a sudden irresistible impulse, attributable, we think, to the beauty of the fruit and the exciting nature of the enterprise. We hope very much that we have left enough for the Flower Show, and we will be careful not to do it again. We should like to mention that a measure of justice has already been done, in the shape of three of the juiciest, but if there is anything further coming to us, we shall try to receive it in a becoming spirit of penitence."

"Well, there!" said Mr. Puffett. "If I didn't say to Jinny, 'Jinny,' I says, 'I ope the young gentleman doesn't tell 'is lordship. He'll be main angry,' I says, 'and I wouldn't wonder if 'e didn't wallop 'im.' 'Oh, Dad,' she says, 'run up quick, never mind your Sunday coat, and tell 'is lordship as 'e didn't take only two peaches and there's plenty left,' she says. So I comes as quick as I can, only I 'ad ter wash, what with doin' out the pig sties, and jest to put on a clean collar; but not bein' as young as I was, and gettin' stout-like, I don't get up the 'ill as quick as I might. There wasn't no call to thrash the young gentleman, me lord, me 'avin' caught 'im afore much 'arm was done. Boys will be boys—and I'll lay what you like it was some of them other young devils put 'im up to 'it, begging your pardon, me lady."

"Well, Bredon," said his father, "it's very kind of Mr. Puffett to take that view of it. Suppose you go with him up to the house and ask Bunter to draw him a glass of beer. And on the way, you may say whatever your good feeling may suggest."

He waited till the oddly-assorted couple were halfway across the lawn, and then called, "Puffett?"

"Me lord?" said Mr. Puffett, returning alone.

"Was there really much damage done?"

"No, me lord. Only two peaches, like I said. I jest popped out from be'ind the potting shed in time, and 'e was off like one o'clock."

"Thank heaven! From what he said, I was afraid he had wolfed the lot. And, look here, Puffett. Don't ask him who put him up to 'it. I shouldn't imagine he'd tell, but he might fancy he was a bit of a hero for refusing."

"I get you," said Mr. Puffett. "'E's a proper 'igh-sperrited young

gentleman, ain't 'e?" He winked, and went ponderously to rejoin his penitent robber.

The episode was considered closed; and everybody (except Miss Quirk) was surprised when Mr. Puffett arrived next morning at breakfast time and announced without preliminary:

"Beg pardon, me lord, but all my peaches 'as bin took in the night, and I'd be glad to know 'oo done it."

"All your peaches taken, Puffett?"

"Every blessed one of 'em, me lord, practically speakin'. And the Flower Show termorrer."

"Coo!" said Master Bredon. He looked up from his plate, and found Miss Quirk's eye fixed upon him.

"That's a dirty trick," said his lordship. "Have you any idea who it was? Or would you like me to come and look into the matter for you?"

Mr. Puffett turned his bowler hat slowly over between his large hands.

"Not wishin' yer lordship ter put yerself out," he said slowly. "But it jest crossed me mind as summun at the 'ouse might be able ter throw light, as it were, upon the subjick."

"I shouldn't think so," said Peter, "but it's easy to ask. Harriet, do you by any chance know anything about the disappearance of Puffett's peaches?"

Harriet shook her head.

"Not a thing. Roger, dear, please eat your egg not quite so splashily. You've given yourself a mustache like Mr. Billing's."

"Can you give us any help, Bredon?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, sir. Please, Mummy, may I get down?"

"Just a minute, darling. You haven't folded up your napkin."

"Oh, sorry."

"Miss Quirk?"

Miss Quirk was so much aghast at hearing this flat denial that she had remained staring at the eldest Master Wimsey, and started on hearing herself addressed.

"Do I know anything? Well!" She hesitated. "Now, Bredon, am I to tell Daddy? Wouldn't you rather do it yourself?" Bredon shot a quick look at his father, but made no answer. That was only to be expected. Beat a child, and you make him a liar and a coward.

"Come now," said Miss Quirk, coaxingly, "it would be *ever* so much nicer and better and braver to own up, don't you think? It'll make Mummy and Daddy very very sad if you leave it to *me* to tell them."

"To tell us what?" inquired Harriet.

"My dear Harriet," said Miss Quirk, annoyed by this foolish question, "if I tell you *what*, then I've told you, haven't I? And I'm quite *sure* Bredon would much rather tell you himself."

"Bredon," said his father, "have you any idea what Miss Quirk thinks you ought to tell us? Because, if so, you could tell us and we could get on."

"No, sir. I don't know anything about Mr. Puffett's peaches. May I get down *now*, Mummy, please?"

"Oh, Bredon!" cried Miss Quirk, reproachingly. "When I saw you, you know, with my own eyes! Ever so early—at five o'clock this morning. Now, won't you say what you were doing?"

"Oh, that!" said Bredon and blushed. Mr. Puffett scratched his head.

"What were you doing?" asked Harriet gently. "Not anything naughty, darling, were you? Or is it a secret?"

Bredon nodded. "Yes, it's a secret. Something we were doing." He sighed. "I don't think it's naughty, Mum."

"I expect it is though," said Peter in a resigned tone. "Your secrets so often are. Quite unintentionally, no doubt, but they do have a tendency that way. Be warned in time, Bredon, and undo it, or stop doing it, before I discover it. I understand it had nothing to do with Mr. Puffett's peaches?"

"Oh, no, Father. Please, Mummy, may I—?"

"Yes, dear, you may get down. But you must ask Miss Quirk to excuse you."

"Please, Miss Quirk, will you excuse me?"

"Yes, certainly," said Miss Quirk in a mournful tone. Bredon scrambled down hastily, said, "I'm *very* sorry about your peaches, Mr. Puffett," and made his escape.

"I am sorry to have to say it," said Miss Quirk, "but I think, Mr. Puffett, you will find your peaches in the woodshed. I woke up early this morning, and I saw Bredon and another little boy crossing the yard, carrying something between them in a bucket. I waved at them from the window, and they hurried off to the woodshed in what I *can* only call a furtive kind of way."

"Well, Puffett," said his lordship, "I'm sorry about this. Shall I come up and take a look at the place? Or do you wish to search the

woodshed? I am quite sure you will not find your peaches there, though I should hesitate to say what else you might not find."

"I'd be grateful," replied Mr. Puffett, "to 'ave yer advice, me lord, if so be as you could spare the time. What beats me, it's a wide bed, and yet there ain't no footprints, in a manner of speaking, except as it might be young master's, there. Which, footprints bein' in a manner your lordship's walk in life, I made bold to come. But, Master Bredon 'avin' said it weren't him, I reckon them marks'll be wot 'e left yesterday, though 'ow a man or boy either could cross that there bed of damp earth and not leave no sign of 'imself, unless 'e wos a bird, is more than I can make out, nor Jinny neither."

Mr. Tom Puffett was proud of his walled garden. He had built the wall himself (for he was a builder by trade), and it was a handsome brick structure, ten feet high, and topped on all four sides with a noble parapet of broken bottle-glass. The garden lay on the opposite side of the road from the little house where its owner lived with his daughter and son-in-law, and possessed a solid wooden gate, locked at night with a padlock. On either side of it were flourishing orchards; at the back ran a deeply rutted land, still muddy—for the summer, up to the last few days, had been a wet one.

"That there gate," said Mr. Puffett, "was locked last night at nine o'clock as ever is, an' it was still locked when I came in at seven this mornin'; so 'ooever done it 'ad to climb this yer wall."

"So I see," replied Lord Peter. "My demon child is of tender years; still, I admit that he is capable of almost anything, when suitably inspired and assisted. But I don't think he would have done it after yesterday's little incident, and I am positive that if he had done it, he'd have said so."

"Reckon you're right," agreed Mr. Puffett, unlocking the door, "though when I was a nipper like 'im, if I'd 'ad that old woman a-jorin' at me, I'd a-said anythink."

"So'd I," said Peter. "She's a friend of my sister-in-law's, said to need a country holiday. I feel we shall all shortly need a town holiday. Your plums seem to be doing well. H'm. A pebble path isn't the best medium for showing footprints."

"That it's not," admitted Mr. Puffett. He led the way between the neat flower and vegetable beds to the far end of the garden. Here at the foot of the wall was a border about nine feet wide, the middle section of which was empty except for some rows of late-

sown peas. At the back, trained against the wall, stood the peach tree, on which one great solitary fruit glowed rosily among the dark leafage. Across the bed ran a double line of small footprints.

"Did you hoe this bed over after my son's visit yesterday?"

"No, my lord."

"Then he hasn't been here since. Those are his marks all right—I ought to know; I see enough of them on my own flowerbeds." Peter's mouth twitched a little. "Look! He came very softly, trying most honorably not to tread on the peas. He pinched a peach and bolted it where he stood. I enquire, with a parent's natural anxiety, whether he ejected the stone, and observe, with relief, that he did. He moved on, he took a second peach, you popped out from the potting shed, he started like a guilty thing and ran off in a hurry—this time, I am sorry to see, trampling on the peas. I hope he deposited the second peachstone somewhere. Well, Puffett, you're right; there are no other footprints. Could the thief have put down a plank and walked on that, I wonder?"

"There's no planks here," said Mr. Puffett, "except the little 'un I uses meself for bedding out. That's three feet long or thereabouts. Would yer like ter look at it, me lord?"

"No good. A little reflection shows that one cannot cross a nine foot bed on a three foot plank without shifting the plank, and that one cannot at the same time stand on the plank and shift it. You're sure there's only one? Yes? Then that's washed out."

"Could 'e a-brought one with 'im?"

"The orchard walls are high and hard to climb, even without the additional encumbrance of a nine foot plank. Besides, I'm almost sure no plank has been used. I think, if it had, the edges would have left some mark. No, Puffett, nobody crossed this bed. By the way, doesn't it strike you as odd that the thief should have left just one big peach behind? It's pretty conspicuous. Was that done merely to point the joke? Or—wait a minute, what's that?"

Something had caught his eye at the back of the box border, some dozen feet to the right of where they were standing. He picked it up. It was a peach; firm and red and not quite ripe. He stood weighing it thoughtfully in his hand.

"Having picked the peach, he found it wasn't ripe and chucked it away in a temper. Is that likely, Puffett do you think? And unless I am mistaken, there are quite a number of green leaves scattered about the foot of the tree. How often, when one picks a peach, does one break off the leaves as well?"

He looked expectantly at Mr. Puffett, who returned no answer.

"I think," went on Peter, "we will go and have a look in the lane."

Immediately behind the wall ran a rough grass verge. Mr. Puffett, leading the way to this, was peremptorily waved back, and was thereafter treated to a fine exposition of detective work in the traditional manner; his lordship, extended on his stomach, thrusting his long nose and long fingers delicately through each successive tuft of grass, Mr. Puffett himself, stopping with legs well apart and hands on knees, peering anxiously at him from the edge of the lane. Presently the sleuth sat up on his heels and said:

"Here you are, Puffett. There were two men. They came up the lane from the direction of the village, wearing hobnailed boots and carrying a ladder between them. They set up the ladder *here*; the grass, you see, is still a little bent, and there are two deepish dents in the soil. One man climbed to the top and took the peaches, while the other, I think, stood at the foot to keep guard and receive the fruit in a bag or basket or something. This isn't a case of larking youngsters, Puffett; from the length of the strides they were grown men. What enemies have you made in your harmless career? Or who are your chief rivals in the peach class?"

"Well, there," said Mr. Puffett, slowly. "There's the vicar shows peaches, and Dr. Jellyband from Great Pagford, and Jack Baker—he's the policeman, you know, came when Joe Sellon went off to Canada. And there's old Critch; him and me had a dispute about a chimbley. And Maggs the blacksmith—'e didn't 'arf like it w'en I wiped 'is eye last year with me vegetable marrers. Oh, and Waggett the butcher, 'e shows peaches. But I dunno as any o' them 'ud do me a turn like this 'ere. But see 'ere, me lord, 'ow did they *get* the peaches? They couldn't reach 'em from the top of the ladder, nor yet off the wall, let alone sitting on them there bottles. The top o' the tree's five foot below the top o' the wall."

"That's simple," said Peter. "Think of the broken leaves and the peach in the box border, and consider how *you* would have done it. By the way, if you want proof that the robbing was done from this side, get a ladder and look over. I'll lay you anything you like, you'll find that the one peach that was left is hidden by the leaves from anybody looking *down* on it, though it's clearly enough seen from the garden. No, there's no difficulty about how it was done; the difficulty is to put one's hand on the culprits. Unfortunately, there's no footprint clear enough to show the complete pattern of the hobnails."

He considered a moment, while Mr. Puffett watched him with the air of one confidently expecting a good conjuring trick.

"One could make a house-to-house visitation," went on his lordship, "and ask questions, or search. But it's surprising how things disappear, and how people dry up when asked direct questions. Children especially. Look here, Puffett, I'm not at all sure my prodigal son mightn't be able to throw some light on this, after all. But leave me to conduct the examination; it may need delicate handling."

There is one drawback about retreating to a really small place in the country and leaving behind you the stately publicity of town life in a house with ten servants. When you have tucked in yourselves, and your three children, and your indispensable man and your equally indispensable and devoted maid, both time and space become rather fully occupied. You may, by taking your husband into your own room and accommodating the two elder boys in his dressing room, squeeze in an extra person who, like Miss Quirk, has been wished upon you; but it is scarcely possible to run after her all day to see that she is not getting into mischief. This is more particularly the case if you are a novelist by profession, and if, moreover, your idea of a happy holiday is to dispose as completely and briskly as possible of children, book, servants, and visitor, so as to snatch all the available moments for playing the fool with a congenial, but admittedly distracting, husband. Harriet Wimsey, writing for dear life in the sitting room, kept one eye on her paper and the other on Master Paul Wimsey, who was disembowelling his old stuffed rabbit in the window seat. Her ears were open for a yell from young Roger, whose rough-and-tumble with the puppy on the lawn might at any moment end in disaster. Her consciousness was occupied with her plot, her subconsciousness with the fact that she was three months behind on her contract. If she gave an occasional vague thought to her firstborn, it was only to wonder whether he was hindering Bunter at his work, or merely concocting, in his own quiet way, some more than usually hideous shock for his parents. Himself was the last person he ever damaged; he was a child with a singular talent for falling on his feet. She had no attention to spare for Miss Quirk.

Miss Quirk had tried the woodshed, but it was empty, and among its contents she could find nothing more suspicious than a hatchet, a saw, a rabbit hutch, a piece of old carpet, and a wet ring among

the sawdust. She was not surprised that the evidence had been removed; Bredon had been extraordinarily anxious to leave the breakfast table, and his parents had shut their eyes and let him go. Nor had Peter troubled to examine the premises; he had walked straight out of the house with that man Puffett, who naturally could not insist upon a search. Both Peter and Harriet were obviously burking inquiry; they did not want to admit the consequences of their wickedly mistaken system of training.

"Mummy! Come out an' play wiv' me an' Bom-bom!"

"Presently, darling. I've only got a little bit to finish."

"When's presently, Mummy?"

"Very soon. In about ten minutes."

"What's ten minutes, Mummy?"

Harriet laid down her pen. As a conscientious parent, she could not let this opportunity pass. Four years old was said to be too early, but children differed and you never knew.

"Look, darling. Here's the clock. When this long hand gets to *that*, that'll be ten minutes."

"When *this* gets to *that*?"

"Yes, darling. Sit quiet just for a little bit and look after it and tell me when it gets there."

An interval. Miss Quirk had by this time searched the garage, the greenhouse, and the shed that housed the electric plant.

"It isn't moving, Mummy."

"Yes, it is, really, only it goes very, *very* slowly. You'll have to keep a very sharp eye on it."

Miss Quirk had reached the back parts of the house itself. She entered by the back door and passed through the scullery into a passage containing, among other things, the door of the boot hole. In this retreat, she discovered a small village maiden, cleaning a pair of very youthful boots.

"Have you seen—?" began Miss Quirk. Then her eye fell on the boots. "Are those Master Bredon's boots?"

"Yes, miss," said the girl, with the startled look peculiar to young servants when suddenly questioned by strangers.

"They're very dirty," said Miss Quirk. She remembered that Bredon had worn clean sandals when he came in to breakfast. "Give those to me for a moment," said Miss Quirk.

The small maid looked round with a gasp for advice and assistance, but both Bunter and the maid seemed to be occupied else-

where, and one could not refuse a request from a lady staying in the house. Miss Quirk took charge of the boots. "I'll bring them back presently," she said, with a nod, and passed on. Fresh, damp earth on Bredon's boots, and something secret brought home in a pail—it scarcely needed a Peter Wimsey to put two and two together. But Peter Wimsey was refusing to detect in the right place. Miss Quirk would show him.

Miss Quirk went on along the passage and came to a door. As she approached it, it opened and Bredon's face, very dirty, appeared around the edge. At the sight of her, it popped in again like a bolting rabbit.

"Ah!" said Miss Quirk. She pushed the door briskly. But even a child of six, if he can reach it and is determined, can make proper use of a bolt.

"Roger, darling, no! Shaking won't make it go any faster. It'll only give the poor clock tummyache. Oh, look, what a dreadful mess Paul's made with his rabbit. Help him pick up the bits, dear, and then you'll see, the ten minutes will be up."

Peter, returning from Mr. Puffett's garden, found his wife and two-thirds of his family rolling vigorously about the lawn with Bom-bom. Being invited to roll, he rolled, but with only half his attention.

"It's a curious thing," he observed plaintively, "that though my family makes a great deal of noise and always seems to be on top of me" (this was, at the moment, a fact), "I never can lay hands on the bit of it I want at the moment. Where is the pest, Bredon?"

"I haven't dared to ask."

Peter rose up, with his youngest son clinging, leech-like, to his shoulder, and went in search of Bunter, who knew everything without asking.

"Master Bredon, my lord, is engaged at present in altercation with Miss Quirk through the furnace room door."

"Good God, Bunter! Which of them is inside?"

"Master Bredon, my lord."

"I breathe again. I feared we might have to effect a rescue. Catch hold of this incubus, will you, and hand him back to her ladyship."

All Miss Quirk's coaxing had been impotent to lure Bredon out of the furnace room. At Peter's voice she turned quickly.

"Oh, Peter! Do get the child to come out. He's got those peaches in there, and I'm sure he'll make himself ill."

Lord Peter raised his already sufficiently surprised eyebrows.

"If your expert efforts fail," said he, "will my brutal threats have any effect, do you suppose? Besides, even if he *were* eating peaches, ought we, in this peremptory way, to suppress that natural expression of his personality? And whatever makes you imagine that we keep peaches in the furnace room?"

"I know he's got them there," said Miss Quirk. "And I don't blame the child. If you beat a boy for stealing, he'll steal again. Besides, look at these boots he went out in this morning—all covered with damp mold."

Lord Peter took the boots and examined them with interest.

"Elementary, my dear Watson. But allow me to suggest that some training is necessary, even for the work of a practical domestic detective. This mold is not the same color as the mold in Puffett's garden, and in fact is not garden mold at all. Further, if you take the trouble to look at the flower beds, you will see that they are not wet enough to leave as much mud as this on a pair of boots. Thirdly, I can do all the detective work required in this family. And fourthly, you might realize that it is rather discourteous of you to insist that my son is a liar."

"Very well," said Miss Quirk, a little red in the face. "Fetch him out of there, and you'll see."

"But why should I fetch him out, and implant a horrible frustration complex around the furnace room?"

"As you like," said Miss Quirk. "It's no business of mine."

"True," said Peter. He watched her stride angrily away, and said: "Bredon! You can come out. She's gone."

There was the sound of the sliding of iron, and his son slithered out like an eel, pulling the door carefully to behind him.

"You're not very clean, are you?" said his father, dispassionately. "It looks to me as though the furnace room needed dusting. I'm not very clean myself, if it comes to that. I've been crawling in the lane behind Mr. Puffett's garden, trying to find out who stole his peaches."

"*She says I did.*"

"I'll tell you a secret, Bredon. Grownup people don't always know everything, though they try to pretend they do. That is called 'prestige,' and is responsible for most of the wars that devastate the continent of Europe."

"I think," said Bredon, who was accustomed to his father's meaningless outbursts of speech, "she's silly."

"So do I, but don't say I said so."

"And rude."

"And rude. I, on the other hand, am silly, but seldom rude. Your mother is neither rude nor silly."

"Which am I?"

"You are an egotistical extravert of the most irrepressible type. Why do you wear boots when you go mudlarking? It's much less trouble to clean your feet than your boots."

"There's thistles and nettles."

"True, O King! Yes, I know the place now. Down by the stream, at the far end of the paddock. . . . Is that the Secret you've got in the furnace room?"

Bredon nodded, his mouth obstinately shut.

"Can't you let me in on it?"

Bredon shook his head.

"No, I don't think so," he explained candidly. "You see, you might feel you ought to stop it."

"That's awkward. It's so often my duty to stop things. Miss Quirk thinks I oughtn't ever to stop anything, but I don't feel I can go quite as far as that. I wonder what the devil you've been up to. We've had newts and frogs and sticklebacks, and tadpoles are out of season. I hope it isn't adders, Bredon, or you'll swell up and turn purple. I can stand for most livestock, but not adders."

"Tisn' *tadders*," replied his son, with dawning hope. "Only very nearly. An' I don't know what it lives on. I say, if you will let me keep it, d'you mind coming in quick, 'cos I 'spect it's creeped out of the bucket."

"In that case," said his lordship, "I think we'd better conduct a search of the premises instantly. My nerves are fairly good; but if it were to go up the flue and come out in the kitchen—"

He followed his offspring hastily into the furnace room.

"I wish," said Harriet, a little irritably, for she strongly disliked being lectured about her duties and being thus prevented from attending to them, "you wouldn't always talk about 'a' child, as if all children were alike. Even my three are all quite different."

"Mothers always think their own children are different," said Miss Quirk. "But the fundamental principles of child psychology are the same in all, I have studied the subject. Take this question of punishment. when you punish a child—"

"Which child?"

"Any child—you harm the delicate mechanism of its reaction to life. Some become hardened, some become cowed, but in either case you set up a feeling of inferiority."

"It's not so simple. Don't take any child—take mine. If you reason with Bredon, he gets obstinate. He knows perfectly well when he's been naughty, and sometimes he prefers to be naughty and take the consequences. Roger's another matter. I don't think we shall ever whip Roger because he's sensitive and easily frightened and rather likes having his feelings appealed to. But he's already beginning to feel a little inferior to Bredon, because he isn't allowed to be whipped. I suppose we shall have to persuade him that whipping is part of the eldest son's prerogative. Which will be all right provided we don't have to whip Paul."

There were so many dreadful errors in this speech that Miss Quirk scarcely knew where to begin.

"I think it's such a mistake to let the younger ones fancy that there is anything superior in being the eldest. My little nephews and nieces—"

"Yes," said Harriet. "But one's got to prepare people for life, hasn't one? The day is bound to come when they realize that all Peter's real property is entailed."

Miss Quirk said she so much preferred the French custom of dividing all property equally. "It's so much better for the children."

"Yes; but it's very bad for the property."

"But Peter wouldn't put his property before his children!"

Harriet smiled.

"My dear Miss Quirk! Peter's fifty-two, and he's reverting to type."

Peter at that moment was not looking or behaving like fifty-two, but he was rapidly reverting to a much more ancient and early type than the English landed gentleman. He had, with some difficulty, retrieved the serpent from the ash hole, and now sat on a heap of clinker, watching it as it squirmed at the bottom of the bucket.

"Golly, what a whopper!" he said, reverently. "How did you catch him, old man?"

"Well, we went to get minnows, and he came swimming along, and Joey Maggs caught him in his net. And he wanted to kill him along of biting, but I said he couldn' bite, 'cos you told us the

difference between snakes. And Joe bet me I wouldn't let him bite me, an' I said I didn' mind and he said, Is it a dare? an' I said, Yes, if I can have him afterwards, so I let him bite me, only of course he didn' bite an' George helped me bring him back in the bucket."

"So Joey Maggs caught him in his net, did he?"

"Yes, but I knew he wasn't a nadder. And please, sir, will you give me a net, 'cos Joe's got a lovely big one, only he was awfully late this morning and we thought he wasn't coming, and he said somebody had hidden his net."

"Did he? That's very interesting."

"Yes. May I have a net, please?"

"You may."

"Oh, thank you, Father. May I keep him, please, and what does he live on?"

"Beetles, I think." Peter plunged his hand into the bucket, and the snake wound itself about his wrist and slithered along his arm. "Come on, Cuthbert. You remind me of when I was at my prep school, and we put one the dead spit of you into—" He caught himself up, too late.

"Where, Father?"

"Well, there was a master we all hated, and we put a snake in his bed. It's rather frequently done. In fact, I believe it's what grass-snakes are for."

"Is it very naughty to put snakes in people you don't like's beds?"

"Yes. Exceedingly naughty. No nice boy would ever think of doing such a thing. . . . I say, *Bredon*—"

Harriet Wimsey sometimes found her eldest son disconcerting. "You know, Peter, he's a most unconvincing-looking child. I know he's yours, because there is nobody else's he could be. And the color's more or less right. But where on earth did he get that square, stolid appearance, and that incredible snub nose?"

But at that instant, in the furnace room, over the body of the writhing Cuthbert, square-face and hatchet-face stared at one another and grew into an awful, impish likeness.

"Oh, Father!"

"I don't know what your mother will say. We shall get into most frightful trouble. You'd better leave it to me. Cut along now, and ask Bunter if he's got such a thing as a strong flour bag and a stout piece of string, because you'll never make Cuthbert stay in this bucket. And for God's sake, don't go about looking like Guy Fawkes

and Gunpowder Treason. When you've brought the bag, go and wash yourself. I want you to run down with a note to Mr. Puffett's."

Mr. Puffett made his final appearance just after dinner, explaining that he had not been able to come earlier, "along of a job out Lopsley way." He was both grateful and astonished.

"To think of it being old Billy Maggs and that brother of his, and all along o' them perishin' old vegetable marrers. You wouldn't think a chap cud 'arbor a grievance that way, would yer? 'Tain't even as though 'e wor a-showin' peaches of his own. It beats me. Said 'e did it for a joke. 'Joke?' I says to 'im. 'I'd like to 'ear wot the magistrate ud say to that there kinder joke.' 'Owsumdever, I got me peaches back, and the Showbein' termorrer, mebbe they won't 'ave took no 'arm. Good thing 'im and the boys 'adn't 'ave ate the lot."

The household congratulated Mr. Puffett on this happy termination to the incident. Mr. Puffett chuckled.

"Ter think 'o Billy Maggs an' that good-fer-nothin' brother of 'is a-standin' on that there ladder a-fishin' for any peaches with young Joey's stickleback net. A proper silly sight they'd a-bin if anybody'd come that way. 'Think yerselves clever,' I says to Bill. 'W'y, 'is lordship didn't cast one eye over the place afore 'e says, "W'y, Puffett," 'e says, "'ere's Billy Maggs an' that there brother of 'is been a-wallerin' all over your wall like a 'erd of elephants.'" 'Ah! An' a proper fool 'e looked. 'Course, I see now it couldn't only a-been a net, knockin' the leaves about that way. But that there unripe un' got away from 'im all right. 'Bill,' I says, 'you'll never make no fisherman, lettin' 'em get away from you like that.' Pulled 'is leg proper, I did. But see 'ere, me lord, 'ow did yer come ter know it was Billy Maggs's Joey's net? 'E ain't the only one."

"A little judicious inquiry in the proper quarter," replied his lordship. "Billy Maggs's Joe gave the show away, unbeknownst. But see here, Puffett, don't blame Joe. He knew nothing about it, nor did my boy. Only from something Joe said to Bredon I put two and two together."

"Ah!" said Mr. Puffett, "an' that reminds me. I've got more peaches back nor I wants for the Show, so I made bold to bring 'arf-a-dozen round for Master Bredon. I don't mind tellin' you, I did think for about 'arf a minute it might a-bin 'im. Only 'arf a minute, mind you—but knowin' wot boys is, I did jest think it might be."

"It's very kind of you," said Harriet. "Bredon's in bed now, but

we'll give them to him in the morning. He'll enjoy them so much and be so pleased to know you've quite forgiven him for those other two."

"Oh, *them!*" replied Mr. Puffett. "Don't you say nothing more about them. Jest a bit 'o fun, that wos. Well, goodnight all, and many thanks to your lordship. Cool!" said Mr. Puffett, as Peter escorted him to the door, "ter think o' Billy Maggs and that there spindle-shanked brother of 'is a-fishin' for peaches with a kid's net a-top o' my wall. I didden 'arf make 'em all laugh round at the Crown."

Miss Quirk had said nothing. Peter slipped upstairs by the back way, through Harriet's bedroom into his own. In the big fourposter, one boy was asleep, but the other sat up at his cautious approach.

"Have you done the deed, Mr. Scatterblood?"

"No, Cap'en Teach, but your orders shall be carried out in one twirl of a marlin spike. In the meantime, the bold Mr. Puffett has recovered his lost treasure and has haled the criminals up before him and had them hanged at the yardarm after a drumhead court martial. He has sent you a share of the loot."

"Oh, good egg! What did *she* say?"

"Nothing. Mind you, Bredon, if she apologizes, we'll have to call Cuthbert off. A guest is a guest, as long as she behaves like a gentleman."

"Yes, I see. Oh, I do hope she won't apologize!"

"That's a very immoral thing to hope. If you bounce like that, you'll wake your brother."

"Father! Do you think she'll fall down in a fit an' foam at the mouth?"

"I sincerely hope not. As it is, I'm taking my life in my hands. If I perish in the attempt, remember I was true to the Jolly Roger. Goodnight, Cap'en Teach."

"Goodnight, Mr. Scatterblood. I *do* love you."

Lord Peter Wimsey embraced his son, assumed the personality of Mr. Scatterblood and crept softly down the back way to the furnace room. Cuthbert, safe in his bag, was drowsing upon a hot water bottle, and made no demonstration as he was borne upstairs.

Miss Quirk did not apologize, and the subject of peaches was not mentioned again. But she may have sensed a certain constraint in the atmosphere, for she rose rather earlier than usual, saying she was tired and thought she would go to bed.

"Peter," said Harriet, when they were alone; "what *are* you and Bredon up to? You have both been so unnaturally quiet since lunch. You must be in some sort of mischief."

"To a Teach or a Scatterblood," said Peter with dignity, "there is no such word as mischief. We call it piracy on the high seas."

"I knew it," replied Harriet, resignedly. "If I'd realized the disastrous effect sons would have on your character, I'd never have trusted you with any. Oh, dear! I'm thankful that woman's gone to bed; she's so in the way."

"Isn't she? I think she must have picked up her infant psychology from the woman's page in the *Morning Star*. Harriet, absolve me now from all my sins of the future, so that I may enjoy them without remorse."

His wife was not unmoved by this appeal, only observing after an interval, "There's something deplorably frivolous about making love to one's wife after seven years of marriage. Is it my lord's pleasure to come to bed?"

"It is your lord's very great pleasure."

My lord, who in the uncanonical process of obtaining absolution without confession or penitence, had almost lost sight of the sin, was recalled to himself by his wife's exclamation as they passed through the outer bedroom.

"Peter! Where is Bredon?"

He was saved from having to reply by a succession of long and bloodcurdling shrieks, followed by a confused outcry.

"Heavens! said Harriet. "Something's happened to Paul!" She shot through her own room on to the Privy Stair, which, by a subsidiary flight, communicated with the back bedrooms. Peter followed more slowly.

On the landing stood Miss Quirk in her nightgown. She had Bredon's head tucked under her arm, and was smacking him with impressive though ill-directed energy. She continued to shriek as she smacked. Bredon, accustomed to a more scientific discipline, was taking the situation stolidly, but the nursemaid, with her head thrust out of an adjacent door, was crying, "Lor', whatever is it?" Bunter, clattering down from the attic in his pajamas with a long pair of fire tongs in his hand, pulled up short in observing his master and mistress, and, with some dim recollection of his military service, brought his weapon to the present.

Peter seized Miss Quirk by the arm and extricated his son's head from chancery.

"Dear me!" he said. "I thought you objected to corporal chastisement."

Miss Quirk was in no mood for ethical discussion.

"That horrible boy!" she said, panting. "He put a snake in my bed. A disgusting, slimy snake. A snake!"

"Another erroneous inference," said Peter. "I put it there myself."

"You? *You* put a snake in my bed?"

"But I knew all about it," put in Bredon, anxious that the honor and blame should be equitably distributed. "It was all his idea, but it was my snake."

His father rounded upon him. "I didn't tell *you* to come wandering out of your bed."

"No, sir; but you didn't tell me not to."

"Well," said Peter, with a certain grimness, "you got what you came for." He rubbed his son's rump in a comforting manner.

"Huh!" said Bredon. "*She* can't whack for toffee."

"May I ask," demanded Miss Quirk with trembling dignity, "*why* I should have been subjected to this abominable outrage?"

"I fancy," said Peter, "I must have been suffering from ingrowing resentment. It's better to let these impulses have their natural outlet, don't you agree? Repression is always so dangerous. Bunter, find Master Bredon's snake for him and return it carefully to the furnace room. It answers to the name of Cuthbert."

THE STORY THAT WON

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The August Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by David M. Troop of Reading, Pennsylvania. Honorable mentions go to Barbara A. Bennett of Evanston, Illinois; K. J. Franks of Wooster, Ohio; Robert Gray of Rutland, Vermont; Elizabeth Doyle of Tres Pinos, California; E. W. Simonsen of St. Francis, Wisconsin; Chris Conlon of Buellton, California; James Aiello of Sea Cliff, New York; Eileen M. Brandt of Great Falls, Montana; and Madeline A. Buckley of Alameda, California.

CASE CLOSED by David M. Troop

The inspector looked down at the red brick pavement and shook his head in disbelief. "I still can't believe it. Scotland Yard spends thousands of pounds 'untin' 'im down, and this is 'ow it ends."

"Twelve years of my life was spent lookin' for this bloke," Captain Clapton muttered from the corner of his mouth. "Cleverest man I never met."

Inspector Esser side-kicked a stone away from the remains of what was once the greatest criminal mind in London. "I wonder 'ow they'll bury 'im?" the inspector quipped.

"I think they may just leave him there and pave right over him." Captain Clapton smiled at his own joke.

"Any witnesses?"

"The old lady across the way said she saw him come out of the doughnut shop down the street. She recognized him from the photo in the newspaper. Shabby appearance, dark glasses, one arm. Said he just wasn't looking where he was going."

Inspector Esser shook his head once more and grumbled something in what the captain assumed was part of his garbled dialect.

"Would you care for some tea, inspector?" Captain Clapton offered.

"Sure, why not? 'E's not goin' anywhere this time."

The two detectives turned away from their adversary and strolled toward the pub. The inspector shook his head and gargled as they passed the CAUTION—WORK AREA sign that was posted near the now resting steamroller.

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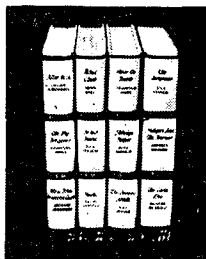
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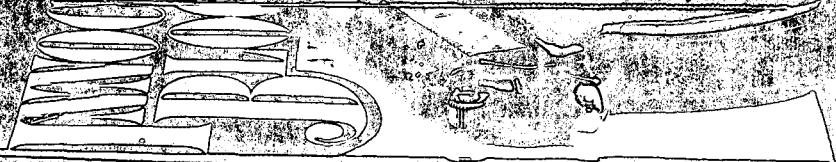
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